School-Based Responsiveness-to-Intervention (RTI) Practices

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A major commitment of the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) has been to work with school sites that are implementing RTI. 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 responsiveness to intervention (RTI) in elementary schools throughout the United States.

In conjunction with the six Regional Resource Centers, NRCLD staff identified and solicited the participation of schools that had developed responsiveness to intervention 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: school-wide screening, research-based reading instruction, research-based progress monitoring, data-based decision making, staff involvement, and parent involvement.

RTI Components

All components of RTI are vital to building a strong system for improved instruction and the prevention of inappropriate identification of students with learning disabilities. At the heart of RTI lie screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making. When teachers have a clear view and a specific understanding, through screening, of the status of the students' achievement, have easy access to appropriate instructional methods for addressing the needs of the great majority of students showing low achievement, and have tools for measuring how those methods are working, their own feelings of self-efficacy are strengthened, creating an effective, positive cycle.

School-Wide Screening

School-Wide Screening – 19 Sites

All but three of the 19 sites used *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)* or some comparable CBM measure as one part of their screening process in general education classes. In all cases but two, these sites screened students three times per year. One site used CBM monthly, and the other site assessed students even more frequently. For those sites not using *DIBELS*/CBM, one site used a district-level assessment four times each year; another site used a variety of assessments in kindergarten through fifth grade, three times each year for K-3 and twice each year for grades four and five. The third site used *Open Court* language assessments every six weeks.

An important finding was that sites used multiple assessments for screening, with a variation in type and frequency that occurred across grade levels. Six sites used six screening assessments, two sites used five screening assessments, seven sites used four screening assessments, three sites used three, and one site used only one.

School-Wide Screening – One Specific School

(The following description provides details of one school's practices regarding school-wide screening.) Because time is a big issue when doing school-wide screenings,

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staff members from one elementary school have trained a group of volunteers to administer fluency and accuracy screenings to reduce the time teachers spend on this task. They also use associates and nearby college students to help in various ways. School staff members also find determining appropriate screening materials a challenging process. They agree that some choices (e.g., the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*) are easy; more difficult to find are screening assessments to match the skills for which they want to screen. Another challenge is to acquire and use multiple sources of data to help validate students' skill deficits.

Using the data to make appropriate decisions regarding interventions has also been a challenge for this elementary school staff. After collecting the data, they must also store and sort the data so that they can be easily analyzed. When analyzing the data, school staff must decide how to provide interventions to students when no current program matches their need.

Tier 2 Progress Monitoring (PM)

Tier 2 Progress Monitoring – 19 Sites

When we look at progress monitoring for Tier 2, we see that 16 of the 19 elementary school sites use *DIBELS* as one of their progress monitoring measures. Ten of the 16 sites monitored students with *DIBELS* weekly, three sites used *DIBELS* every two weeks, and three sites used *DIBELS* less frequently or without a frequency specified. Other CBM measures were used by seven sites: three sites used CBM every week and four every two weeks. Seventeen other PM measures were reported, but no measures other than *DIBELS* and CBM were reported being used by more than four sites. Two sites used a district measure, and one site used a state measure.

Just as we found for Tier 1 measures, the instruments varied in type and number across sites and grade levels. Only four sites used just one measure for progress monitoring (three used *DIBELS*; one used *Open Court*). Seven of the 19 sites used two different measures, six sites used either three or four measures, one used five measures, and another used a total of seven different measures.

Tier 2 Progress Monitoring – One Specific School

(*The following description provides details of one school's practices regarding progress monitoring.)* Within one school's core curriculum, progress monitoring is recommended if 1) a student is new to the district and the initial assessment shows at-risk performance, 2) a student has previously received supplemental or intervention support and is now performing at benchmark level, or 3) a teacher has concerns about the amount of progress a student is making. For these students, progress is monitored weekly using *DIBELS* measures. School staff members assess kindergartners' initial sound fluency in the fall and their phoneme segmentation fluency in the winter. For first-graders, nonsense word fluency is assessed in the fall; oral reading fluency is assessed in the spring. School staff members use oral reading fluency measures for second- and third-graders three times a year.

Progress monitoring in the core curriculum will be discontinued for those students who score at or above the benchmark performance level. School staff will further analyze the performance of students who score below the benchmark performance, with the goal of matching instruction to student need. These students may remain in the core curriculum with changes to instruction/practice or may be placed in the core curriculum plus supplemental support.

Options considered when planning supplemental support and matching students' needs with the appropriate type and intensity of resources and instruction include the following: more instructional or practice time; smaller instructional groups; more precisely targeted instruction at the right level; more explicit explanations; more systematic instructional sequences; more extensive opportunities for guided practice; and more opportunities for corrective feedback.

For students receiving supplemental support, in addition to core curriculum instruction, progress is often monitored twice each week. If students' slope of performance is on the goal line or above the benchmark performance level, two options are considered: a return to core instruction with progress monitoring occurring weekly or continuing to receive the core curriculum plus supplemental instruction. For students who have four consecutive reading probe data points below the established goal line, who are scoring below the benchmark performance, or whose slope of performance falls below the goal line (trend line), three options are considered for the student: further analysis or assessment; remaining in the core curriculum plus supplemental support with changes; or receiving the core curriculum plus supplemental instruction plus intervention(s).

For this elementary school, one of the greatest challenges continues to be in the area of follow-up coaching and support for supplemental- and intervention-level instruction in vocabulary and comprehension. An additional challenge for this school staff focuses on fidelity of implementation of supplemental- and intervention-level instruction. Finding additional instruction and practice time (core plus supplemental plus intervention) without sacrificing other core academic subjects also remains a challenge.

Tier 2 Progress Monitoring – A Second Specific School

(The following description provides details of one school's practices regarding progress monitoring.) To monitor the progress of students working at a level below that of their peers, school staff uses *DIBELS* and *Read Naturally* weekly. *DIBELS* is used for fluency monitoring – letter naming fluency, phoneme segmentation fluency,

nonsense word fluency, and oral reading fluency for students in first grade; nonsense word fluency and oral reading fluency for students in second grade; and oral reading fluency for students in third through fifth grades. *Read Naturally* is used to practice and monitor fluency and to assess comprehension.

If a student is making progress in Tier 2, school staff continue all interventions and continue to monitor progress. If a student is not making progress, school staff choose a Tier 3 course of action that could include preteaching lessons in a small group just before the lesson; reducing student-teacher ratios by placing teaching assistants or special education teachers in small groups; adding small-group and one-on-one instruction to a student's day; and placing students who need additional assistance in a staff-supported study hall.

To monitor the progress of students working at the Tier 3 level, this school continues with the same measures and cut points used for Tier 2 progress monitoring – letter naming fluency, phoneme segmentation fluency, nonsense word fluency, and oral reading fluency for students in first grade; nonsense word fluency and oral reading fluency for students in second grade; and oral reading fluency for students in third through fifth grades.

If a student is making progress in the Tier 3 setting, school staff continue all interventions and continue to monitor progress. If a student is not making progress, school staff members answer the following four questions to make their decision about entitlement: Is there resistance to general education interventions? Are resources beyond those available in the general education curriculum necessary to enable the child to participate and progress in the general education curriculum? Is there evidence of severe discrepancy between the student's performance and peers' performance in the area of concern? Is there a convergence of evidence that logically and empirically supports the team's decision?

Challenges for this school include decisions about who will do the progress monitoring and when will progress monitoring get done during an already busy day. Another concern is the fidelity with which *DIBELS* is being done. With staff members having been trained at different times and by different people, it is important to ensure that all staff members are conducting *DIBELS* assessments in the same way.

Data-Based Decision Making

Data-Based Decision Making – One Specific School

(The following description provides details of one school's practices regarding data-based decision making.) One elementary school has a literacy team that includes general and special education teachers, Reading Plus teachers, area educational advisors, the curriculum director, and the principal. This team meets three times a year for Literacy Day sessions. These sessions occur just after district-wide student screenings and allow team members to review the district-wide screening data as well as data from the other school-wide screening measures. Data are then used to make necessary changes to current student interventions and to identify students who require more individualized and more intensive interventions.

For example, a Literacy Day data sheet for a fifth-grade class would include the names of the students in the left-hand column and scores earned by each of those students on September fluency and accuracy measures and the *Gates-McGinitie* comprehension and vocabulary tests. A companion sheet, Literacy Day Notes, also would be used during meeting discussions. Again, student names would be in the left-hand column with adjacent columns for student areas of need, current interventions, and comments. As discussion progresses during the sessions, changes are made based on student data, students with skill deficits are considered for services, and students with extension needs are considered for gifted and talented placement.

Data-Based Decision Making – A Second Specific School

(The following description provides details of one school's practices regarding data-based decision making.) The RTI process at another elementary school is child-centered. School staff members look at the students individually and plan for them individually. They recognize that all children are different and that what works for one might not work for another. If several students fit into a group, then that is great for school staff, but the school will provide interventions one-on-one, if needed. Staff members provide early intervention and put a great amount of effort into the interventions with the goal of having students working at grade level, with the realization that some students need sustained interventions and instruction in a different setting.

This elementary school uses specific cut-off scores, provided by the state department of education, for its assessments. Decisions about next steps are made at the individual level. Staff members look at the students individually; the team meets every nine weeks to discuss progress, look at graphs, and decide what the next steps for an individual student should be.

During a team meeting, the team discusses the student's scores on the state assessments and determines whether the scores match the student's work in the classroom and whether concerns persist about this student. If a student continues to score below basic proficiency on both assessments, even after interventions, the student will likely be given Tier 2 instruction, with the hope of improvement on state assessments and class work.

If a student has three data points above the aim line, staff members either continue with the interventions or increase the student's goal. If a student has three data points

below the aim line, staff members change the intervention by changing the targeted skill or by increasing the amount of time spent with the intervention(s). If a student continues to have data points below the aim line (again, the three data points rule is used), school staff will work with the student in a smaller group (two or three students) or will work with the student on a one-to-one basis.

RTI at Tualatin Elementary School

Overview and Demographics

Tualatin Elementary School enrolls 522 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, with three to four classrooms per grade. Nearly 50 percent (260) of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Sixty-five students are served in special education (15 are identified as having a learning disability), and 160 are English language learners (ELL).

Important Organizing Models – the EBIS Early Identification Process

Tualatin Elementary uses a continuum of school-wide instructional and positive behavior support. Primary prevention systems are school- and classroom-wide for all students, staff, and settings. All students receive quality behavior and academic instruction and support; all are screened for instructional needs in the fall, winter, and spring. Examples of data that are gathered three times a year include *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)*, Oregon State Assessments, and data involving attendance, behavior, and counseling referrals.

About 20 percent of the students qualify for secondary prevention, which involves specialized group systems for at-risk students. These students receive small-group interventions. About 5 percent of students qualify for tertiary prevention, which is specialized, individualized systems that are in place for students at high risk. Students in this group receive further individualized interventions.

School Structure

The EBIS (Effective Behavior & Instructional Support) Team meets weekly. Team members include the school principal, counselor, literacy specialist, special education teacher, ELL specialists, and classroom teacher representatives from each grade level. The team monitors all students who receive small-group and individual interventions. The team also oversees RTI fidelity and makes referrals to special education.

- The EBS (Effective Behavior Support) Team meets twice monthly to plan and implement school-wide supports.
- Grade-level teams meet monthly. At each meeting, team members use data to evaluate the core program, plan initial interventions for the "20 percent group," and monitor student progress. Grade-level teams also report to the EBIS Team.
- Content Area Teams meet every month to recommend curriculum and instructional improvements across all content areas.
- Individual Student Case Management implements intensive interventions and monitors student progress within the RTI process.

Decision Rules

Tualatin Elementary School has developed the following decision rules:

- *Eighty Percent Decision Rule:* If fewer than 80 percent of Tualatin students are meeting benchmarks, Tualatin staff review the core program(s).
- *Twenty Percent Decision Rule:* Students below the 20th percentile in academic skills or with chronic behavior needs (more than five absences or more than three counseling or discipline referrals in a 30-day period) are placed in small-group instruction.
- *Change Small Group or Individual Intervention Rule:* When progress data are below the aim line on three consecutive days, or when six data points produce a flat or decreasing trend line, school staff change the intervention.
- *Individualize Instruction Rule:* When a student fails to progress after two consecutive small-group interventions, individual instruction begins.
- *Refer for Special Education Evaluation Rule:* When a student fails to progress after two consecutive individually designed interventions, the student is referred for special education evaluation.

Progress Monitoring and Instructional Decision Making

Decisions about future instruction are based on progress monitoring results.

- If the group intervention has been successful, the student may no longer need small-group instruction.
- If the intervention appears to be working for the student, the intervention should be continued as is.
- If the group intervention is not working for the student, the intervention should be revised or refined.
- If the group intervention is highly unlikely to be successful for the student, a more individualized approach is needed.

Progress Monitoring and Instructional Decision Making – An Example

A young student named Daisy is participating in the general curriculum but isn't doing well. The EBIS Team reviews Daisy's screening data; from the data review, the team decides to place Daisy in a group intervention. Daisy does not improve, and the EBIS Team designs an individual intervention for Daisy. (Had Daisy improved with the group intervention, she would have resumed the general program.)

Because Daisy continues to show no improvement with the first individual intervention, the EBIS Team designs a second individual intervention for her. (Had Daisy shown good improvement with the first individual intervention, the team would determine whether 1) other factors are suspected as the cause for her poor response to general and group instruction or 2) the individual intervention needed to be given at such an intense level that a disability might be suspected. In the latter case, a special education referral is initiated.)

Daisy still does not show improvement when she is given instruction with a second individual intervention. At this point, a special education referral is initiated.

RTI at Blue Ball Elementary School

Overview and Demographics

Blue Ball Elementary School enrolls 393 students in kindergarten through sixth grade, with two classes for each grade. Of the total student population, 21 percent receive free or reduced lunch, 26 students are served in special education, and eight students are English language learners (ELL).

Assessment Data Used in Tier 1 Decision Making

Within Tier 1, kindergartners are assessed three times. Assessments used include CBM math, *DIBELS* (reading), letter identification, Concepts About Print, and a fall writing sample (rubric). In first grade (Tier 1), assessment data are gathered three times from *DIBELS*, text level reading, fall writing sample, and four *AIMSWeb* measures – oral counting, number identification, missing numbers, and quantity discrimination. Second-grade students take the following assessments three times during the year: *DIBELS*, *Degrees of Reading Power* (*DRP*), fall writing sample, Monitoring Basic Skills Progress in math skills and computation. Assessments for students in Tier 1, grades three through six, are the same, occur three times per year, and consist of *DIBELS*, *4Sight* reading and math assessment, *DRP*, fall writing sample, Monitoring Basic Skills Progress in math skills and computation.

Assessment Data Used in Tier 2 Decision Making

Assessment data for Tier 2 are collected more frequently than for Tier 1— either weekly (for students needing and receiving intensive support) or monthly (for students needing and receiving strategic, or supplemental, support). Kindergarten measures are *DIBELS*, letter identification, Concepts About Print, and fall writing sample (rubric). Tier 2 assessments for grades one through six are the same as those for Tier 1, but they, as for the other assessments in Tier 2, occur either weekly or monthly rather than just three times per year.

Assessment Data Used in Tier 3 Decision Making

Tier 3 kindergarten assessments occur weekly and consist of *DIBELS* and four *AIMSWeb* measures – oral counting, number identification, missing numbers, and quantity discrimination. Tier 3 measures for grades one through six also occur weekly and consist of four *AIMSWeb* assessments: oral reading fluency (ORF), MAZE, math, and written expression.

Assessment Data Used in Special Education Decision Making

Kindergarten through sixth-grade students in the special education tier are assessed with *CORE* Phonics and Phonological Segmentation twice a year, Reading Comprehension Oral Retell once a month, and Precision Teaching daily. In addition, kindergartners in special education are assessed with five *AIMSWeb* measures: written expression, oral counting, number identification, missing numbers, and quantity discrimination. Additional measures for students in grades one through six are four *AIMSWeb* assessments: oral reading fluency, MAZE, math, and written expression.

Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Data

All screening data are reviewed in late September or early October at grade-level team meetings. Students are identified as "advanced/benchmark," "strategic," or "intensive" in reading and math. Students identified as "strategic" or "intensive" are those students whose scores on screening measures fall below the 25th percentile. "Strategic" and "intensive" students move to Tier 2 instructional groupings (small groups), and the grade-level teachers develop an intervention plan to address their needs. The progress of "strategic" students is monitored every month; the progress of "intensive" students is monitored every week. "Intensive" students whose progress remains on or above the aim line remain at the Tier 2 level. "Intensive" students whose progress falls below the aim line (student trend line is below the goal line) are moved to Tier 3, where they will receive Tier 3 interventions. After five weeks, students' progress monitoring graphs are reviewed to determine whether interventions or group structure need to be refined.

Remaining in and Moving from Tier 2

Students at all grades may remain at the Tier 2 level until they achieve proficiency on progress monitoring measures or if their progress remains below the aim line for five weeks. Students move from Tier 2 back to Tier 1 if they score in the proficient range on progress monitoring measures. A student leaves Tier 2 and moves to Tier 3 when fall screening data indicate partial proficiency on all measures of a skill area, i.e., all reading measures or

all math measures, or when progress monitoring data remain below the aim line for five weeks.

Remaining in and Moving from Tier 3

For all grade levels, Tier 3 interventions continue for 10 to 20 weeks. If, after 10 weeks, a student receiving Tier 3 interventions achieves the target intervention goal, he or she will move back to Tier 2. Students move back to Tier 1 upon achieving proficiency on Tier 2 progress monitoring measures. If, after 10 to 20 weeks of Tier 3 intervention, a student's progress trend line continues to fall below the goal line or if a positive response requires an intensity of resources not available in general education, parent permission is sought to consider the student for special education services.

Remaining in and Moving from Special Education

Students receive special education services until they are able to achieve the individualized criteria established in the IEP.