

## RTI Leadership – Planning for Implementation

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### **Abstract**

*A diverse and experienced leadership team is crucial to the implementation of Response Through Intervention (RTI) in secondary schools. Transitioning from traditional resource models, secondary school educators require support and guidance from knowledgeable and respected school leaders as they encounter many complexities unique to their level. Team membership will evolve throughout implementation, but the initial members should at the very least include an administrator, special education teacher, instructional coach, and guidance counsellor.*

Implementation of Response Through Intervention (RTI) at the secondary school level requires many structures to be in place, but there is not one more important than solid leadership. Though much focus and research has been done on RTI at the elementary level, the shift into the high school is still relatively new, necessitating strong support throughout implementation. Therefore, a school leadership team, consisting of a group of professionals ready to support, guide and participate in the process, is crucial to the successful transition to the RTI model. When assembling the teams, it is vital to keep in mind the needs of the students and then draw on the strengths and expertise of available staff (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012). These teams should include professionals of diverse specialties and draw from experienced and respected educators within the school, therefore increasing the team's credibility (Wright, 2010). Though membership composition will vary from school to school, the leadership team will benefit from including an administrator, special education teacher, instructional coach, and guidance counsellor.

### **Role of the RTI Leadership Team**

RTI leadership teams are responsible for preparing personnel to effectively and, in some cases, dramatically change traditional practices; without staff buy-in, these changes are all the more challenging given the complexities unique to the high school setting. The leadership team must be diverse in its experience and expertise. Scheduling, department isolation, provincial exams, and numerous other factors associated with high school education will add to the challenges of implementation. A leadership team must guide and support staff to overcome these obstacles before implementation begins. Because much collaboration will occur within the classroom, being knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction, and using data such as formative assessment in guiding instruction is integral (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011). Team members must also be problem solvers experienced in classroom organization, management, and collaboration (Beebe-Frankenberger, Ferriter-Smith, Hunsaker, & Juneau, 2008). To successfully implement the process, school leaders must be prepared to field questions, supply possible solutions, and guide staff. This knowledge and familiarity with classroom strategies is necessary for leadership teams monitor the fidelity of the entire process (Beebe-Frankenberger et al., 2008).

Successful RTI implementation requires a whole-school approach; thus, leadership teams have the responsibility of engaging all stakeholders. Simply stated, the teams must work to get buy-in at the school level, greatly increasing the chance of success (Khan & Mellard, 2008). Addressing concerns and perceived staff challenges is essential to planning for implementation. Attitudes, past practices, and fear of the unknown will make some staff reluctant participants. Secondary school educators may feel skeptical about the validity of the process, feeling that these preventions should have occurred at the elementary level (Ehren, n.d.). Weary educators, who have seen school initiatives come and go, may think of RTI as just another top-down

initiative that will inevitably fade away (Ehren, n.d.). Traditional teachers may take offense to being encouraged to change practices that they have used for years. Being aware of such barriers will better facilitate training and provide effective support at the school level because, with change, there is always some pushback. Gaining consensus is crucial to developing an understanding and thus desire by staff to create successful learning for all students (Fuchs & Bergeron, 2013). Experienced leadership teams will engage all stakeholders in planning, implementing and problem solving, in order to build staff cohesiveness and a greater sense of ownership of the process (Nellis, 2012).

### **Role of School Administration**

It is essential that administrators actively lead the school in establishing a positive, risk-free environment that fosters effective RTI implementation (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Providing clear expectations for staff and offering professional development outside of school and within the school timetable are integral to the planning process. School staff needs to have clear expectations about RTI implementation; identifying negotiables and non-negotiables is essential (Putnam, 2008). Because RTI implementation requires significant changes for staff, vague ideas and unclear procedures will jeopardize the process. In order to lead the staff in a process fairly unknown to high school teachers, administrators themselves must be knowledgeable about the process and support the rationale with research-based data (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008). Apprehension occurs due to lack of clarity around teacher and administrator roles within the implementation process (Isbell & Szabo, 2014). Not knowing whom to address when challenges occur, where to go when more information is needed, or who is accountable for specific actions will result in chaos. All stakeholders must be supported by administration, be well informed, and be included in the process; otherwise they will be reluctant participants. A strong leader will cultivate a climate for successful implementation by creating awareness and support within the entire school (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011).

All stakeholders need training and professional development in differentiation, data collection, and progress monitoring (Werts, Carpenter, & Fewell, 2014). Formal professional development can be costly, particularly for rural schools where a significant amount of professional development funds are spent on transportation and accommodation. Administrators need to prioritize budgets and become jugglers of budget allotments. Other school budget areas will see a reduction in funds to accommodate the need for RTI professional development. Regardless of the method used to fund professional development, without it, the integrity of the entire process is at risk.

Collaboration is integral to RTI because no one teacher is responsible for students' education, yet finding time for staff to team and learn from one another is a significant challenge to secondary level RTI implementation. Professional Learning Committees, grade level meetings, and subject area meetings all provide opportunities for such collaboration. Though providing scheduled time for staff among grade levels and content areas can be a nightmare to coordinate, it is possible with flexible, creative scheduling (Khan & Mellard, 2008). Collaboration and training provide staff with opportunities to grow as professionals, and empower them to be leaders and valued team members (Whitten, Esteves, & Woodrow, 2009). Though staff collaboration is the mainstay of RTI, a strong administration is essential because administrators are ultimately accountable for monitoring the fidelity of the RTI process in schools.

### **Role of Special Education**

The role of the special education teacher has undoubtedly undergone the greatest role transformation with the implementation of RTI. The focus has shifted to provide support for all learners along with continual collaboration with classroom teachers. Traditionally, secondary school students requiring support were helped by being identified for special education

programs. Unfortunately, under the traditional resource model, not all students were eligible for such assistance and therefore other options were searched out, or the students fell through the cracks of the system (Sanger, Friedli, Brunken, Snow, & Ritzman, 2012). With the shift to RTI, rather than simply asking what help the students qualify for, educators are encouraged to determine student needs and then identify who could best provide the support within the school (Buffum et al. 2012). The special educator shares knowledge about strategic intervention for struggling learners, but it is applicable to all learners, not just those identified as needing special education support.

In order to provide the greater range of support and services for all learners, special education teachers must work collaboratively with teachers (Khan & Mellard, 2008). The expectation is still to provide expertise on methodology and how best to support students who are not being successful in school (Brownsville Independent School District, 2012). The difference is that resource teachers would also work within the classroom setting by working with small groups of students or even co-teaching with classroom teachers. To be successful, resource teachers require a more in-depth understanding of curriculum and general instruction (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). This model of collaboration and shared responsibility, though beneficial to all stakeholders, comes with challenges. The lack of unity between special education and regular education impedes the success of process (Sanger, et al., 2012). Resource teachers may feel a sense of ownership for specific students on their caseload and be hesitant to relinquish their control. Classroom teachers may feel protective of their classes and subject areas, or even suspicious of the reason that another professional is in the classroom with them. In order for RTI to be successful, strong teaming and trust must be fostered because it will help individuals to avoid territorial behaviours when first implementing the process (Sanger et al., 2012). Promoting co-teaching, as well as providing time for co-teachers to plan for instruction and assessment, would ease the transition to this process (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Willingness to work collaboratively would expand services, skills, and knowledge that special educators have in order to reach all students.

### **Role of Instructional Coaches**

The need for a respected, approachable “master teacher” who is readily available to coach staff in areas of instruction is crucial to implementation. Instructional coaches must understand best practices; if students are not achieving, instruction needs to change. Without support and encouragement, staff may be unwilling to make the change. Validation of the process will be attained if teaching staff feels that the coach is well qualified and is ultimately there to support their efforts; trust is necessary in this relationship. It is a tenacious relationship because coaches must be trained to assist teachers in implementing interventions while still ensuring that interventions are being implemented as intended (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011).

RTI encourages educators to look at how their instruction can be differentiated to meet student needs rather than focusing on what the student is or is not able to do (Khan & Mellard, 2008). Continuing to instruct and assess students without applying changes will prevent students from successfully attaining outcomes. Instruction is the key, meaning that teaching practices must be examined and then differentiated to improve learning (Ehren, n.d.). This shift in instruction and assessment practices can be a high source of anxiety; therefore, the experience and support of a coach is instrumental to developing these skills. Instructional coaches provide leadership teams and classroom teachers with fundamental information regarding assessment and instruction; in essence, they manage the RTI initiative within classrooms (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

Ready availability of an instructional coach within the school is integral, particularly in the planning and beginning stages of RTI implementation. Though important, professional development alone will not be sufficient support for some teaching staff, particularly those who

have been ensconced in traditional instruction for years. Questions and obstacles will regularly arise, so ideally, this individual's position should not be restrained by scheduled courses. Monitoring data, providing feedback, and troubleshooting in a timely manner are essential to the process. If a teacher runs into some challenges, the school-based instructional coach may be able to clear his/her schedule to assist with instruction, or even co-teach for a time period. Because implementing high-quality differentiated instruction is not only a cornerstone of RTI, but also a significant challenge, it is imperative to have instructional coaches included in the leadership team (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

### **Role of Guidance Counsellors**

The guidance counsellor provides a link between leadership teams and the students themselves by filling in details about student needs. This information is essential when planning appropriate interventions. Guidance counsellors will help the rest of the team members to understand that students may be affected by outside factors, such as home life and social groups. Such insight may lead teams to determine that additional supports, and possibly outside agencies, are required (Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012). As well, due to the nature of their contacts with students, guidance counsellors are the best-suited contacts for students needing to self-refer themselves to RTI intervention. The information provided by guidance teachers fills gaps in the general profile of each student, which essentially results in well-developed interventions.

Guidance counsellors typically develop trusting relationships with students who need support in class, and they most likely meet with those students on a regular basis. For these reasons, it would be fitting to have them monitor academic and behavioural interventions for these specific situations (Brownsville Independent School District, 2012). It is crucial to address personal concerns, such as alienation and low personal esteem, while working through academic challenges. Without addressing these student issues, the process is destined to fail these students (Ehren, n.d.). Guidance provides that interpersonal support for students, providing educators with possible strategies to help the students attain success. As with all other leadership team members, collaboration and shared responsibility are key.

### **Conclusion**

Although composition of the school leadership team is entirely flexible and may change as the school progresses through the implementation process, it is crucial to have thoughtfully selected key school leaders involved in the team from the start. At the very least, each school leadership team should include an administrator, special education teacher, instructional coach, and guidance counsellor. These team members should be experienced and from diverse specialties in order to address the variety of complex challenges of RTI implementation at the secondary school level.

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