# RtI for Nurturing Giftedness: Implications for the RtI School-Based Team

by Claire E. Hughes and Karen Rollins

*The first-grade team of Mr. Orton, Ms. Poland, and Ms. Lloyd are meeting to review DIBELS scores on the third-grade reading tests that were administered at the beginning of the year. It's the end of September, and they're meeting for the first time to initiate the process known as RtI. In their district, it's known as Responsiveness to Intervention, and the school's assistant principal, Ms. Tracy, is leading the team. Ms. Tracy instructs them to rank the 92 scores from lowest to highest. The teachers have done so, and they are examining the needs of their bottom 25%, about 24 students. Ms. Poland notes that even among these lower students, there are about seven of them whose scores are significantly lower than the groups and whose reading is of great concern. Ms. Weichel, the special education teacher who collaborates with both Mr. Orton's and Ms. Lloyd's classes, has been asked to include these seven students when she works with the students with identified learning disabilities. She has a reduced special education caseload so that she can engage in this RtI process and work on a short-term basis with these Tier 3 students. She is*

*going to try some short-term interventions for about 6 weeks and document the students' responses to these interventions, focusing on measuring the students' fluency rates and comprehension because those areas seem to be of greatest concern. In addition, the first-grade teachers have agreed to focus on the 17 other students and emphasize specific reading concepts to them, focusing specific questions and activities to these identified students in Tier 2. The team hopes that with the assistance of Ms. Weichel and the focused instruction, the students' performance can improve, and a follow-up team meeting is scheduled for mid-November.*

*Just as the group is breaking up, Mr. Orton looked at the ranked test scores and noted that there were five students whose reading scores were significantly ahead of their peers' and a significant number of students whose test scores were above the average. "Wait!" he called out to his fellow team members, "Why don't we do something for these students? Don't we want ALL of our students to improve?"*

## An Issue of "Fairness"

As in the preceding scenario, if such attention is to be given to low-achieving students, a similar focus must be placed on students whose initial performance is higher than other students. Without the same focus, these students' achievement over time may suffer due to the little educational effort that historically has been placed on raising the achievement level of students who are outperforming their peers. Studies that track students over time, particularly students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Diiulio, 2007), find that such early performers slip and do not maintain their achievement levels, and in many cases, perform more and more poorly over time. Shouldn't *falling* achievement warrant such attention as well, particularly among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

If education is to focus on developing student abilities and providing an educated work force, then it also must focus on the growth and achievement for all students—where "all" truly does mean *all*. In the face of changing educational policies and processes, such as RtI, it is critically important that teachers and advocates for gifted education come to the table to insist that the philosophy that undergirds the changes inherent in the law are addressed to meet the needs of all students. From a practical viewpoint, there are some critical similarities and differences to be addressed from a campus-level perspective. Table 1 summarizes the major RtI principles (Council for Exceptional Children, The Association for the Gifted [CEC-TAG], 2009; Fuchs & Deschler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007) and describes how they can be implemented across all levels—to include struggling learners as well as gifted learners.

## Universal Screening

If teachers were to implement RtI for gifted students, the universal screening aspect would need to identify students who were achieving at a high level. Using a parallel structure to traditional RtI, those students who score in the top 25% could warrant extra attention, perhaps needing some additional challenges or differentiated instruction. Students in the top 5% to 10% of the class would need significantly more intensive interventions. In addition, the universal screening instrument would need to include a higher level ceiling than grade-level expectations to identify those exceptional students who might be candidates for significant acceleration in certain subject areas. Overall, it would

be important as a member of an RtI team within a school to determine two points for discussions—those students performing below given criteria, and those students performing above a certain criteria. Providing teachers with a chart such as the one in Figure 1 would allow teachers to look at their class as a whole, and to focus on the two extremes: those students who are significantly ahead of their peers and those students who are significantly below their peers.

As a school system, procedures need to be in place to identify children who are performing either significantly below or significantly above their peers. Because of ceiling effects found among students who score in the 90th percentile and above and floor effects from students who score below the 15th percentile, it would be necessary to have testing procedures in place to allow specialists to offer off-grade-level testing to determine at what grade level a student is actually performing. A child in fifth grade who is scoring above the 95th percentile in math might be performing at a seventh-grade level, or even at a ninth-grade level. Similarly, a fifth-grade student who scores at the 10th percentile in math might be at the first-grade level, or he or she might not even recognize numbers. For instructional purposes for both students, it would be important to know specific knowledge and skills within the curriculum for targeting instruction. Children who are performing at either of the extreme ends must have off-level testing in order for instructional practices to match their educational levels. Such instructional approaches are the antithesis of elitism; rather, it is determining appropriate instructional intervention for every child—a goal for the changing educational landscape.

## Table 1
## RtI Principles and Implications for Serving the Needs of Gifted Students

| RtI Principle | Traditional RtI Actions for Struggling Students | System Implications for Gifted Learners |
|---|---|---|
| Universal Screening | Students who score below established criteria receive intensive remedial instruction. | Scores who score above established criteria receive differentiated and advanced instruction. |
| Early Intervention | Students can qualify for intervening services before "waiting to fail." | Abilities are identified within a nurturing system regardless of label or potentially biased teacher recommendations. |
| Tiered System of Interventions | The more intense the needs, and the farther from typical the student, the more intense and long-term the instructional interventions that are provided. | The more intense the needs, and the farther from typical the student, the more intense and long-term the instructional interventions that are provided. |
| Fidelity of Intervention | The student actually receives instruction geared to particular needs; not a "one-size-fits-all" remedial program. | The student actually receives instruction geared to particular needs; not a "one-size-fits-all" gifted program. |
| Progress Monitoring | Documented student progress has a goal of moving a child from a more intensive to a less intensive tier of intervention as a child raises achievement levels. | Documented student progress has a goal of moving a child from a less intensive to a more intensive tier of intervention as a child raises achievement levels. |
| Professional Development | Training is provided for specific, research-based interventions that are effective for struggling learners. | Training is provided for specific strategies of acceleration, enrichment, and differentiation that are effective with gifted learners. |
| Collaborative Structure | Greater collaboration is needed between special education, reading specialists, and other intervention specialists to identify and serve struggling learners. Greater use of collaboration and coteaching facilitates this process. | Gifted education professionals collaborate with general education teachers to identify and serve high-achieving students in need of differentiated services. Greater possibilities for appropriate services for twice-exceptional students are available through collaborations with special education professionals. |
| Parental Involvement | Sharing information to and from families raises the achievement levels and effectiveness of interventions. Targeted interventions are built upon acquired information regarding interest areas and areas of strength. | Sharing information to and from families raises the achievement levels and effectiveness of interventions. Targeted interventions are built upon acquired information regarding interest areas and areas of strength. |
| Resources | Special education monies are freed up to serve students on a short-term basis who are not identified as having a disability. | Gifted education resources are more targeted to meet the needs of students, rather than the needs of the program. |

## Early Identification and Intervention

Often, gifted education is reserved for students who qualify for gifted services, not recognizing that many students may not score above a required level without some exposure to specific content and/or proper identification. In a case for early intervention, the issue of nurturing talent, especially among diverse populations, becomes primary. Simply stated, many students enter schools with lower achievement because of extenuating circumstances, such as poverty or cultural and linguistic differences, that impact their level of achievement in a mainstream school. By waiting to provide talent development activities until students "qualify" for gifted education services, schools are ensuring that only students who have the appropriate backgrounds when they enter school receive such services. RtI promises an exciting means of nurturing talent and the potential for growth before a student qualifies.

In addition, there are many instances where students are not identified as gifted due to a "mismatch" between the identification instrument and the child's strengths. Through an RtI delivery model that incorporates tiers for students performing above their peers in the school curriculum, you ensure that all students with potential receive services even if the designated instrument of choice from the district does not indicate qualification for gifted services. Without nurturing the strengths of gifted stu-

*Reading*: Rate the students in the class, with 1 being much lower, and 5 being much higher than other students in the class on the following:

| Name of Student | Oral Reading | Word Attack | Vocabulary | Sight Word Vocabulary | Reading Comprehension |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

*Math:* Rate the students in the class, with 1 being much lower, and 5 being much higher than other students in the class on the following:

| Name of Student | Numeration | Estimation | Money | Measurement | Geometry | Graphing | Word Problems |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

*Writing:* Rate the students in the class, with 1 being much lower, and 5 being much higher that other students in the class on the following:

| Name of Student | Expressiveness | Story Length | Sticks to Topic | Creativity | Mechanics | Handwriting | Spelling |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

**Figure 1. Universal screening.**

dents, true growth cannot occur and students are in danger of not developing, and even losing, their gifts.

Most significantly, by allowing the integrated opportunities for enrichment and remediation, the needs of twice-exceptional students can be more easily met. Winebrenner (2003) suggested that when dealing with twice-exceptional students, teachers should give direct teaching of needed skills while providing acceleration and enrichment, with emphasis on problem solving, reasoning, and critical thinking. Such dual-instructional approaches become possible when all professionals in gifted education and special education and the general education classroom teachers are working together to provide instruction that matches each child's curricular needs. For example, a child might score in the 90th percentile in math, and in the 20th percentile in reading. That child could conceivably have both needs met with instruction provided by different tiers of instruction: advanced instruction in math with reading modifications and direct instruction in reading strategies.

## Tiered System of Interventions

Gifted students are an incredibly heterogeneous group (Cross, 2005), with greater diversity in achievement levels than among typical students. Thus, the idea of a one-size-fits-all gifted education program is not based upon the actual characteristics of gifted students. Historically, there has been a tremendous disconnect between the process of identification based upon characteristics and the program that is offered for gifted learners (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995). In a tiered program, teachers would be better able to more specifically meet the needs of gifted learners based on their characteristics. It is important to realize that we must differentiate within a gifted group. Even though gifted students may have been identified as gifted, there are still strengths, weaknesses, and a tremendous range of actual performance levels within this group.

An important aspect to remember within the tiers of instruction are the concepts of flexibility and fluidity. Once a student has been identified as needing a different tier of instruction, whether it be for remediation or enrichment, it will be imperative to allow that child the flexibility of movement as he or she develops in the area of need. Also, in respect to movement, fluidity allows that child to move within tiers when needed. With struggling students, this movement may be up to another tier for more specific instruction and then back to a previous tier once concepts have been mastered. However, that movement may occur again if additional struggles are evident through data monitoring. With a gifted child, movement also will be important. However, this movement may not only be an upward movement to the next tier for more specific enrichment, but also additional movement as that child develops. A gifted student may stay at

this higher level tier indefinitely as part of differentiation.

## Tier 1

Tier 1 includes instruction that would be differentiated within the general education classroom. Using a tiered system, or menu system of instruction, or any of the other differentiation methods recommended by gifted education experts such as Kaplan, Tomlinson, and VanTassel-Baska, students would have the opportunity within the general education classroom to excel and strive for higher levels. Twice-exceptional children do well particularly within a tiered approach that allows for focused instruction that is both targeted at areas of challenge and areas of strength. One of the best practices to ensure success of twice-exceptional students is allowing them to participate in gifted instruction (Baum & Owen, 2004; Silverman, 1989), particularly if that instruction is within the same setting.

## Tier 2

In Tier 2, perhaps using the assistance of a gifted education teacher, students would receive additional enrichment and/or accelerative options within specific content areas. Contracts and compacting are strategies that could be employed to provide challenging instruction in those areas of strength for a gifted child.

## Tier 3

In Tier 3, perhaps the most intensive services, gifted students would receive more significant acceleration and/or gifted group activities. The criteria for such programming would be based on clearly established protocols. These protocols would establish criteria for the practice of acceleration, which
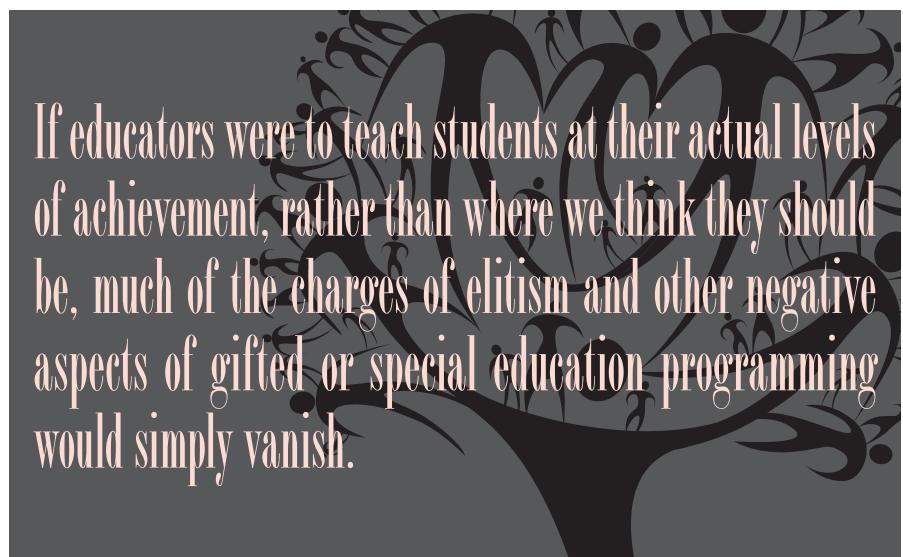
> If educators were to teach students at their actual levels of achievement, rather than where we think they should be, much of the charges of elitism and other negative aspects of gifted or special education programming would simply vanish.

is commonly misunderstood and even rejected by many general education teachers and administrators (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). As a student's performance grows, more and more accelerative and intensive enrichment opportunities would be provided. Examples of Tier 3 include intensive acceleration, such as skipping a grade or two, early Advanced Placement (AP) classes, or early college classes.

The issue of increasing levels of instruction as student needs grow and as student achievement levels rise raises the issue of off-level testing. A child who scores in the 95th or 99th percentile on a standardized test when compared to his or her peers has "topped" out the test. The full range of that child's knowledge or skills is still not known to teachers. Similarly, a student who makes a 100 on a curriculum-based measure or a pretest before instruction has clearly mastered that level of curriculum, but it is still not clear on what level of achievement that child is operating. In order to provide such information, it is necessary to use tests and measures that are designed for an above-grade-level population to know that child's actual level of performance. The actual level of performance can

more clearly help teachers know where to begin teaching. Programs such as the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) have been organized around this principle for years. If educators were to teach students at their actual levels of achievement, rather than where we think they should be, much of the charges of elitism and other negative aspects of gifted or special education programming would simply vanish.

## Fidelity of Intervention

Ensuring the fidelity of intervention, or a systematic procedure that is clearly followed for all students, ensures two important aspects: (a) Curricular interventions are selected based upon data-based decisions and are related to identifiable, measurable gifted characteristics; and (b) educators are held accountable for presenting the instruction in a manner that reflects best teaching practices. The issue of bias and potential bias of identification in gifted education is one that is rampant throughout the literature (Coleman, 2003; Coleman & Gallagher, 1995). With the inclusion of data, and the fidelity of instruction, the issue of bias is removed.

## Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is the systematic gathering of data to evaluate the progress of a child. For a teacher, it means knowing how one will evaluate a child on a particular set of skills over time. It may mean repeating a set of curriculum-based measures, or using a more standardized test over the course of several weeks. Progress monitoring is key to the process of Tiers 1 and 2. In a remedial-focused RtI, students often are only in Tier 2 for a specified amount of time before either (a) their needs are remediated and they are moved back to Tier 1, or (b) more long-term solutions are needed and they are served in Tier 3 or special education. The goal in a remedial program, clearly, is to raise student achievement to the level of his or her peers and to receive instruction in the general education classroom, or Tier 1. However, in a strengths-based RtI, the goal is to raise achievement *beyond* the general education classroom. Thus, students should not simply "pass through" Tier 2, but should perhaps remain in this tier as a learning objective. Heightened achievement gains that are achieved in Tier 2 should be maintained and encouraged. Progress monitoring is critical to this process of determining how much a student's achievement levels are changing over time. With the goal being achievement gains for all students, progress monitoring is key to measuring that goal.

## Professional Development

With the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), which requires all teacher preparation programs to contain information about teaching gifted learners, among other populations, there is significant inter-est in the content that teachers will learn regarding characteristics and the implications for the education of gifted learners. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) currently is examining the core knowledge that would be considered essential for general education teachers. However, although it is acknowledged that the majority of gifted children spend most of their time in general education classrooms, there is a set of core knowledge and skills that The Association for the Gifted, Council for Exceptional Children (CEC-TAG); NAGC; and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) programs have recently provided for the education of teachers of gifted students (Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska, & Robinson, 2008; Kitano, Montgomery, VanTassel-Baska, & Johnsen, 2008). Thus, there is a set of guidelines for professional development opportunities for a district to follow in selecting and training teachers of gifted students.

## Collaborative Structure

Perhaps the area of greatest potential to aid the classroom teacher in the RtI model is in the area of collaboration. Collaboration as a service delivery option currently exists in special education and holds great promise for RtI as a means of identifying and serving students who need additional interventions (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). There is great potential for gifted educators to be tapped as resources in order to better enable the general education teacher to meet the needs of potentially strong students. Gifted education teachers can gather data, provide ongoing assessment, and provide services for students at multiple tiers, such as direct acceleration and enrichment activities, to students showing a need for these services. Significant research indicates that within a general education setting, little to no differentiation for high-achieving students occurs on a regular, systematic basis (Tomlinson, 2008). With the collaboration of a gifted education professional, such differentiation can occur, and counter the argument of "I just don't have time or know how to meet everyone's needs," which is a concern for many general education teachers.

In addition to the services that gifted education teachers can provide within

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a general education setting, gifted education teachers also can provide more intensive direct services in a Tier 3 setting. Some school districts may opt for accelerative or self-contained settings for gifted students who significantly exceed the achievement level of their peers and need to continue to grow and achieve. Ensuring such growth for students who are two to five grade levels ahead of their peers would require school districts to truly provide appropriate education for all—one that emphasizes growth for all.

Finally, one of the strongest aspects of the collaborative process is the ability to meet the needs of twice-exceptional learners, or gifted students with disabilities. Twice-exceptional students are directly cited in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990) as a population that must have their diverse needs met. In other words, states and districts do not have the option to only meet the remedial needs of twice-exceptional students; they *must* develop the child's abilities as well. In fact, in the case of twice-exceptional students, it is imperative to develop strengths while remediating, because remediation alone does not build self-efficacy as found in students with learning disabilities (Little, 2001). With such a legal mandate pressuring states and districts, gifted education professionals have an opportunity to engage with special educators and general educators in a problem-solving process that can produce a coherent instructional approach, rather than the often disjointed educational patchwork that emerges with twice-exceptional learners (Hughes, 2009). Similarly, such opportunities for collaboration exist for gifted English language learners (ELL) and Title I populations. Providing a vehicle for collaboration through RtI can ensure the profes-

sional respect of a gifted education teacher, and consequently, the field.

## Parental Involvement

One of the keys to the success of RtI is developing strategies that are effective for a particular student. In order to link content to a student, it is critical to know the interests and strengths of a particular child, whether the interventions be of a remedial nature (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005) or of an enrichment nature (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). Parents, clearly, have a valued perspective on an individual child's strengths and interests. In addition, the family, if it has worked with an educational system for some length of time, will have a clearer idea of strategies that have been tried and found effective with the child in the past than a teacher developing a plan with limited experience with a child.

In addition to providing information to educators, parents also are ultimately responsible for their child's education, and as such, can glean information from educators about choices possible for their child. Through teamwork, educators and parents can work together to meet the high level needs of students with the right to learn even if that learning is beyond their age peers.

## RtI Process

There are four essential determinations to make when creating a Response to Intervention plan, whether the focus be on a child who is falling behind or a child who is ahead of his or her peers. These include strategies to: (a) determine the need, (b) determine the intervention, (c) determine the progress, and (d) determine the decision-making

criteria. Each of these four areas involves all members of the team. This team might consist of administrators, the classroom teacher, the instructional specialist, the intervention teacher, the gifted education teacher, parents, the school psychologist, whoever will be examining student growth, or anyone else who has a vested interest in the success of the child. It is not recommended that students who are ahead of their peers have a separate process from students who are falling behind their peers. All members of the team should undertake the same challenge of "How can we assist this child in making achievement gains when the standard curriculum is not appropriate to do so?"—whether it be a struggling child or a high-achieving child.

*Ms. Tracy, Mr. Orton, Ms. Poland, and Ms. Lloyd met again the next day to identify particular students for intervention purposes with a goal of increasing achievement for all students. Ms. Weichel, the special education teacher, and Ms. Joyce, the gifted education teacher, also were present so that they could lend their specialized knowledge to the formulation of intervention plans. Following an agenda such as the one shown in Figure 2, the meeting lasted about 2 hours, and at the end of the process, a set of both remedial and accelerated opportunities for students with difficulties and strengths were identified.*

## Conclusions and Implications

Because implementation of RtI in the framework of special education's identification process still is relatively new, many districts are only now determining the implications at the school or system level. In fact, in some districts these discussions may not be

Present: Administrator, General Education Classroom Teacher, Special Educator, Gifted Educator, Parents, School Psychologist. One of these person is, on a rotating basis, assigned the role of meeting facilitator and chairperson. Other meeting roles might include timekeeper, case manager, and recorder (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2007).

### Review Baseline Data (5 Minutes)

*Goals*
To determine starting point/levels within the academic or behavioral targeted area of concern.

*Sample Questions*
- Where is the student currently functioning, according to the information provided?
- Is there anything significant in the student's history that needs to be discussed?

### Discussion of Teacher Observations of Particular Students (10 Minutes)

*Sample Question*
- Given the information, what are specific issues or problems we can address today for each student?

### Inventory Student Strengths, Talents, and Specific Areas of Challenge (10 Minutes)

*Goals*
- Discuss and record the student's strengths, talents, and areas of difficulty.
- Discuss incentives that motivate the student.

*Sample Questions*
- What rewards or incentives does this child seem to look forward to?
- What are some things that this student enjoys or does well?

### Select Target Areas (5–10 Minutes)

*Goals*
- Define the top one to two areas for remediation or acceleration in easily observable, measurable terms.
- Identify the presence of underlying academic skill or deficits, mismatch between student skills and classroom instruction.

### Set Academic and/or Behavioral Goals (15–20 Minutes)

*Goal*
- For each of the academic areas, set ambitious but realistic goals that are attainable in 6–8 weeks.

*Sample Question*
- Given the student's current functioning, at what level would you like to see him or her after a 6–8 week intervention period?

### Design an Intervention Plan (15–20 Minutes)

*Goals*
- Select at least one intervention that addresses each of the selected referral areas.

- Spell out the particulars of the intervention as a series of specific steps so that the teacher or other person(s) involved can do so efficiently and correctly.

*Sample Questions*
- What intervention ideas would best meet this student's needs?
- What is it about this particular intervention that is likely to improve the student's behavior or academic functioning?
- Is there specialized training or materials that you feel are needed to carry out this intervention?

### Method of Monitoring Progress (5 Minutes)

*Goal*
- Each goal must have a method of assessing and monitoring progress.

*Sample Questions*
- Does the monitoring information really measure the teacher's concerns?
- Who will collect the monitoring information?
- How frequently should the data be collected?

### Plan How to Share Meeting Information With The Student's Parents (if They Did Not Attend; 5 Minutes)

*Goal*
- Agree on who will contact the parents to share the student's intervention plan and invite the parents to a future RTI meeting.

*Sample Questions*
- What specific details about the intervention would be of greatest interest to the parents?

### Review the Intervention and Monitoring Plans (5 Minutes)

*Goal*
- Review the main points of the intervention and monitoring plans with the teachers involved and other team members.

*Sample Questions*
- Do the members of our team know what their responsibilities are in carrying out the intervention and monitoring plans for these students?
- Is our team able to support the teachers?
- Did our team help the teacher assemble a good intervention plan that is feasible and can be carried out with currently available resources?
- How will we determine fidelity of implementation?

### Determine Date and Purpose of Next Meeting to Evaluate Progress (5 Minutes)

*Goals*
- Determine criteria for successful achievement.
- Determine length of time for monitoring of progress.

*Sample Questions*
- What will be the criteria for change of tier or placement?
- What will "appropriate achievement gain" mean?

**Figure 2. Sample RtI team meeting agenda.**

taking place. The concept of also identifying students who show promise in a nurturing framework, as opposed to a preventative framework, is even newer still. However, many of the school-level issues are similar. Teachers need to know (a) how to identify students for whom the standard curriculum is not appropriate for reasonable achievement growth, (b) how to find resources and provide differentiated activities, (c) what other alternatives are available if longer term issues are involved, (d) how to use data to make instructional decisions, and (e) how to collaborate effectively with other members of the educational community to meet the varied needs of students. These issues are the same whether the child is initially below the standard, grade-level curriculum or above it.

The most critical difference between the RtI framework for special education identification purposes and for gifted education purposes is that the goal of remediation is to make children more similar to other children, whereas the goal of nurturing strengths is to make children more different. There will be "closing of the gap" in a remedial-based RtI Model if student strengths are ignored and the top is left to remain static while the lower achieving student grow and develop. However, in an RtI model, where there also is a strength-based emphasis, the gap between the lowest students and the highest students should expand if no cap is placed on student achievement. All students should have opportunities to make continual growth. At this time in our educational history, RtI provides a means of making that happen. As education shifts in a way to allow struggling students to grow and develop, so must gifted students be allowed to develop and learn as well.

**GCT**

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