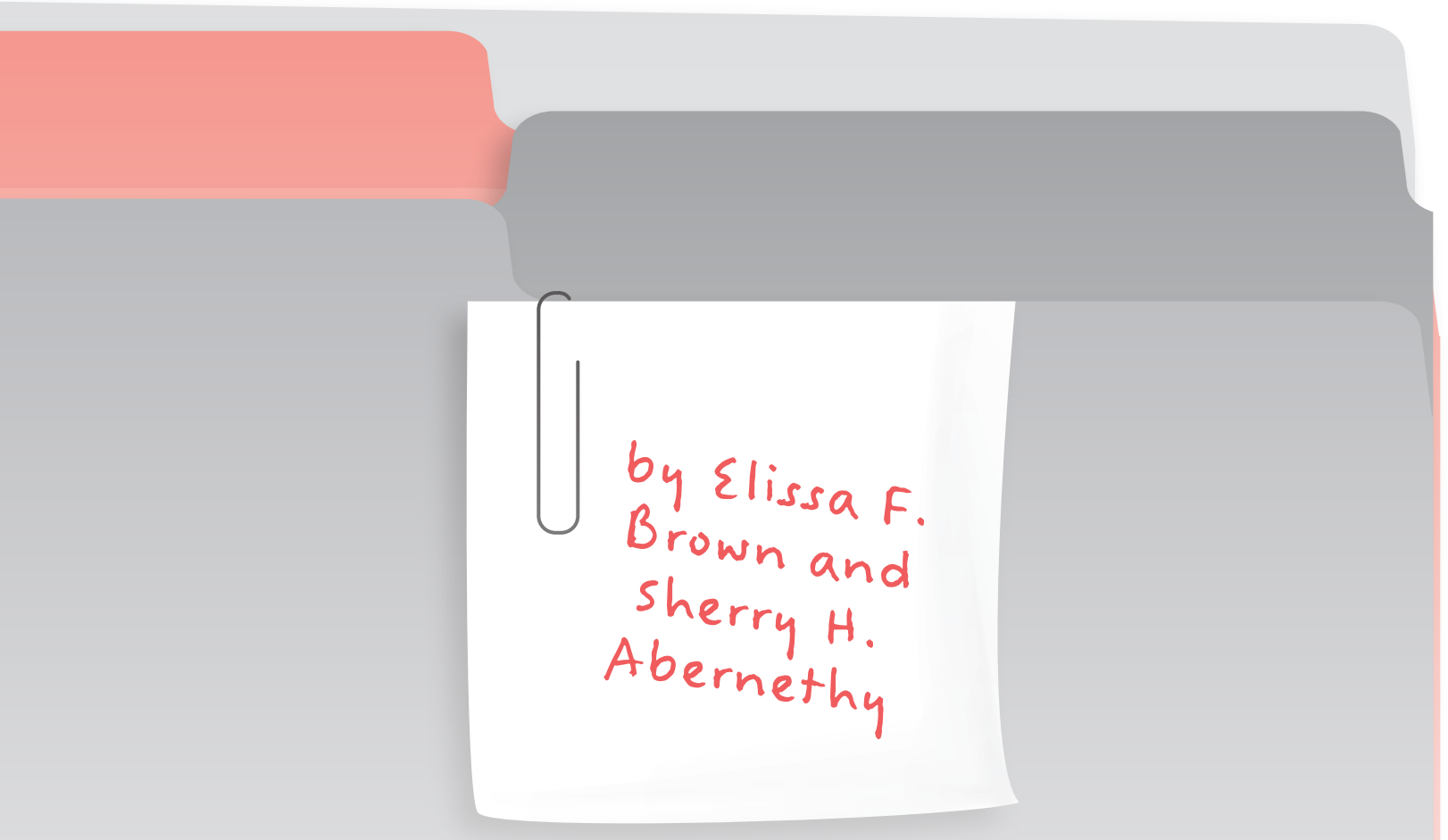
Policy Implications at the State and District Level With RtI for Gifted Students

Introduction

Response to Intervention (RtI) has become an instructional practice employed predominantly in general education classrooms across the United States as a direct result of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004. RtI has implications for gifted education as a framework for policy development because it is an integrative approach to classroom practices that modify high-quality instruction based upon students' academic or behavioral needs (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2007). It is based on a public health model of intervention in which tiers of increasingly intense interventions are directed at correspondingly smaller and smaller population segments (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Students are systemically and frequently monitored, data are evaluated, goals and evidence-based interventions are implemented in order to preclude a student from being identified, and ultimately the students are placed in special education services. The focus on the three aspects of (a) screening and prevention, (b) early intervention, and (c) disability determination underscores RtI as an important process because of its potential to help schools provide appropriate learning experiences for all students.

At a practical level, RtI is just sound, effective teaching. It is preassessing students through a strategic process, making modifications in accordance to a student's displayed needs, and monitoring student progress employing a tiered approach in order for higher student outcomes to be realized. So, one might ask, "Don't teachers of the gifted do this already?" There are many program and curricular models in gifted education; some address a tiered approach to instruction and interventions, while other models address curricular or grouping strategies (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2009). Regardless of the program or curricular model employed in gifted education classrooms, it is typically not implemented consistently across the country or even within the same school district. As a field, gifted education does not endorse any one approach to serving students because of the range of student abilities and resulting concomitant diverse needs. Therefore, service delivery in gifted education is still heavily teacher dependent. Yet, many of the components of RtI are employed in gifted education, albeit



inconsistently, such as preassessment. The use of preassessment in gifted education to diagnostically evaluate a gifted learner's performance prior to instruction has been widely used in classrooms to determine an authentic level of achievement and then implement pedagogical modifications for the student. Preassessment has been documented as an effective tool with gifted learners (Callahan, 2005), especially if we accept the premise that gifted students already have mastered approximately 30% of the curriculum to be taught (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Although some of the current gifted curricular and instructional models embed key components of RtI within them, they are not implemented in a coherent or strategic fashion and educational policies undergirding both RtI and effective practices in gifted education are scant. Unless RtI has leadership support and district and/or state policies, it will not be implemented with fidelity and will lose its potential as a framework for overall student achievement. Leadership and policies become the infrastructure for RtI to not only become operational but systemic. Therefore, a need exists to create state and local policies that allow for the congruence of RtI and gifted education.

Rationale for Policy Initiatives

The stance that policies delineating the use of RtI for gifted students are needed is based on three major assumptions about the role of policies for the gifted.

The first assumption is that policies for gifted learners have been relegated to state and local initiatives, typically linked to funding priorities. Without a district or state policy, implementation of RtI remains idiosyncratic, lacks fidelity, and rests on the backs of a passionate few who value its inherent potential for student achievement. Employing RtI as a vehicle for gifted education service and delivery would require a policy that speaks to the flexibility of curricular, instructional, and assessment practices.

The second assumption is that gifted education needs coherency among program components, such as identification and services linked to professional development and teacher preparation. Frequently, due to a lack of adequate resources, gifted educa-

tion has been a fragmented enterprise at the local level, perhaps a pull-out program in language arts at the elementary school, an ability-grouped mathematics class at the middle school, or a few designated Advanced Placement (AP) courses at the high school. Each operates independently from the other and is not necessarily linked to the identification processes employed to find gifted students and develop their potential. In order to achieve a coherent framework for gifted programming that includes RtI as an approach, the field must employ a systematic framework for improvement and must develop policies that support implementation and program improvement in a coherent fashion.

The third assumption is that the development of policy that speaks to RtI's implication for gifted students links gifted education to the broader reform efforts occurring within special and general education. Gifted education can ill afford to be an "island unto oneself." Clune (1993) noted that agenda policy development is an essential component of sustaining educational reform. Gifted education historically has used the special education model as a basis for programming and identification and has used the psychological measurement orientation as a means of encompassing student outliers. At the same time, gifted education has attempted to incorporate general educational principles of curriculum design, teacher expertise, and organizational support structures. If gifted education is to continue and advance as a field, it will have to embrace the world of general education, its models, and its curriculum reform while not abandoning the exceptionality concept that defines the nature of the population (VanTassel-Baska, 2003). Therefore, a policy that can create a hybrid combining the best practices of special, general, and gifted education can ensure sound practices built on a research base.

Potential RtI Components for Gifted Policy Development

At this point, policy development and implementation of coherency among policy components in gifted education has been limited. However, by linking gifted policies to RtI and other special or general education practices, the field can reach consensus on policy components that could serve as a template for program and student improvement. Table 1 explores the components for policy interface that speak to the core components and stages in RtI, implications for gifted education, and areas for policy development.

Universal screening as the first key component of RtI is a corollary for screening and nurturing potential in gifted education prior to any formal identification. Screening in gifted education usually precedes a more formalized identification process and allows schools and teachers a more informal opportunity to assess students' skills and abilities. One of the considerations with screening for giftedness is to use measures that allow for multiple levels of growth to be displayed. Ceiling effect with this population is an issue and should be taken into consideration. When choosing measures to access the core, teachers should choose materials that allow for above-grade-level growth to be observed or displayed. RtI screening is based on the core curriculum as the source of data and the core curriculum in most schools and states is pitched at grade-level competencies; therefore, above-grade-level core curriculum for universal screening with gifted students should be employed. Gifted education could readily adopt some of the screening practices employed in RtI as screening practices for nurturing potential by considering students' authentic responses to curriculum prior to formal identification. Most states do not have a formal policy for screening in gifted education, but it is implied within their identification policy.

Early identification policies that call for nurturing potential in historically underserved populations, such as the culturally and linguistically diverse, economically disadvantaged, and twice-exceptional, would shore up that all students are screened for potential. Attention to identification issues receives the greatest emphasis in all state regulations in gifted education. States are employing more equitable approaches and procedures for identification, seeking to incorporate language that honors a diverse student population (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, & Stambaugh, 2006). Universal screening that focuses on early intervention could be incorporated into an identification policy that calls for casting a wide net and the use of early intervention strategies in considering talent propensities of early learners and seeking potential in traditionally underrepresented populations.

Another component of RtI that interfaces with gifted education once a student is identified for gifted services is the degree to which services are linked to learners' skills, interests, and learning profiles. A policy on service delivery being directly linked to the learner and resulting educational needs strengthens gifted education because it begins to provide coherency among programming aspects, such as identification and service. In gifted education, state policies on appropriate programs and services are less prominent, and frequently, if they exist, are not connected to identification. In the RtI model of reme-

Table 1
Components of Response to Intervention and the Implications for Gifted Education and Policy Development

Components of RtI	Implications for Gifted	Areas for Policy Development
Screening/Prevention (Universal Screening: Assessing the Core)	Baseline screening for all students to determine talent pool and potentiality; preassessment to determine prerequisite knowledge and skills	Early identification policies that call for nurturing potential Early identification policies for ensuring that historically underserved populations, including culturally and linguistically diverse, economically disadvantaged, and twice-exceptional students, are proactively sought
Early Intervention	Discerning individual precocity and making modifications accordingly with individuals or small groups of students	
Disability/Ability Determination	Identifying based on ability determination	Policy on off-grade-level testing for highly gifted Policy that matches service delivery to identification or area(s) of ability
Tiered Service Delivery	Providing services that match learner abilities, interests, and skills	
Fidelity of Implementation	Ensuring coherency among program components such as identification and service, personnel preparation, and program evaluation, as well as ensuring that what gets implemented is research-based	Evaluation/accountability policy for monitoring program delivery and fidelity of services
Professional Development	Providing professional development for different stakeholders, as well as encouraging or requiring teachers of the gifted to have a gifted license or add-on endorsement	Policy for teacher development, licensure, and professional development of all personnel involved with gifted students
Parent Involvement	Communicating and involving parents in gifted programs or as part of a local steering committee; parents may be part of a local committee to develop or revise local plans for the gifted	Policy on involving parents either as part of a local steering committee, to develop and revise local plans, or other mechanism ensuring parent involvement and communication

dial needs currently in place in many states, service delivery is tiered based on the intensity of need. If a student requires intensive reading remediation based on earlier screening measures, it is provided. Often in the field of gifted education, a school system may have a service delivery model, such as a pull-out resource room focusing on enrichment activities, that may or may not have anything to do with the learner but rather scheduling or teacher preferences. Services for gifted learners must be linked to the student's level of achievement to ensure student growth.

Another area in which RtI has implications for gifted education is the area of fidelity of implementing services and overall fidelity of program components. Progress monitoring as a key component in RtI is a scientifically based practice of assessing students' performance on a regular basis. Progress monitoring helps school teams make ongoing decisions about instruction. In an era of accountability, implementing an array of services with fidelity cannot be understated. Providing evidence-based instruction resulting in student learning has been found to be almost nonexistent in gifted evaluation studies. VanTassel-Baska and Feng (2004) found that there was an absence of data on student learning, particularly from a systemic perspective, across seven gifted program evaluations conducted statewide and in local school districts.

Teacher preparation is another key component necessary to ensure program improvement and a standard of quality instruction in gifted education. Access to trained teachers is especially critical because research has documented (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Slavin, 1993) that general classroom teachers make very few, if any, modifications for academically talented learners. Teachers who do receive specialized training are more likely to provide differentiated curricular and instructional approaches that meet the needs of gifted learners. The teacher preparation policies that do exist often lack specificity in respect to content standards or involvement with a state's higher educational community. Moreover, policies typically do not link staff development with teacher performance nor do they delineate the issue of differentiation

of content standards. In 2006, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) adopted standards collaboratively developed by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). These are national standards for university programs that prepare teachers of the gifted and represent a consensus on what teachers should know and be able to do.

Lastly, parental involvement is a key component that interfaces with RtI. In the Response to Intervention model, one of the benefits for parents is that they see how their child is doing compared to peers and how the child's class measures up to other classes of the same grade. They can get these results on a regular basis from their school. If class scores are down, for instance, questions will be raised about the quality of teaching in that class; thus, classroom teachers are more accountable for their instruction. Gifted education could adopt this approach to help ensure that fidelity of implementation with parent support occurs.

Implementation of RtI in North Carolina

North Carolina, like many other states, has recognized this integrative approach to structured levels of support and solid instruction. Although RtI originated from the reauthorization of IDEA 2004 as a process for identifying Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), North Carolina has chosen to focus implementation of this initiative as a vehicle to increase academic and behavioral achievement for all learners by working with regular education and classroom teachers. At present, it is not being employed in gifted education in North Carolina, but it is being implemented in general education classrooms in 92 school systems.

Implementation of RtI using a four-tier model of problem solving in North Carolina began in 2004, with pilots in five school systems. The pilots were chosen through an application process. These school systems represented a geographic cross-section of North Carolina, including varied size, location, and student performance levels. The focus on RtI for these pilot sites began with intensive training in problem solving, curriculum-based assessment, awareness of scientific research-based interventions in curriculum areas, positive behavior support, planning, and facilitation. After the initial training and beginning stages of implementation by the pilots, training was then expanded to other school systems in the state through an additional application process. To date, 195 schools in 92 school systems have participated in state-level training. Currently, 24 school systems across North Carolina with a total count of 62 elementary schools are fully implementing RtI for SLD eligibility. Several secondary schools are moving toward full implementation within the next school year. Preliminary data currently are being collected from the 62 schools fully implementing RtI. Data are being collected on the following RtI components: highest tier of intervention, performance on end-of-year state assessments in reading and math, student retention, and eligibility for exceptional children services.

Although it originally was introduced as an alternative to eligibility determination of specific learning disabilities, schools are finding that this model enables them to look at the performance of all students. Although the training and implementation in North Carolina to date has been to preclude students from being identified with SLD and to avoid the Exceptional Children categorization, discussions have ensued around the applicability to all learners, even those performing above grade level or who have the potential to perform above grade level. But to date, no explicit application of RtI to gifted education has occurred in North Carolina. When schools assess their core instruction, they identify not only students who are lacking in foundational skills, but also students who are in need of enrichment and expanded instruction beyond their current grade-level curriculum. The potential for embedding the RtI model exists for supporting all students, even those who are potentially gifted, through a structured model of multilevel support.

Action Steps for Policy Development

In order to begin considering how RtI and gifted education can inform each other to ensure that gifted students' needs are met within the RtI framework, a review of current policies, in addition to developing new policies, may be in order. The following action steps for policy development provide guiding questions to frame local or state actions when determining the best course of policy options being considered.

- *Convene a Task Force.* Identify a representative sample of stakeholders (local or state) to examine current policies and identify potential areas (e.g., curriculum) for policy development. Stakeholder representation should include gifted educators, special educators, and general educators.
- *Review Current Policies.* What policies currently exist at state or local levels? Are the current policies comprehensive or inclusive of gifted students, even those from traditionally underrepresented populations? Do the policies link or align to the broader local or state context? Do

gifted education policies connect to general education or special education policies in appropriate and meaningful ways?

- *Assess the Implications of Creating a New or Revised Policy.* How are different stakeholders related to the new policy? Would there be any unintended consequences as a result of the revised or new policy? What assumptions does the new or revised policy communicate?
- *Create or Revise Policies.* Create a policy that speaks to screening for potential and includes all growth (below grade level, at grade level, and above grade level), as well as providing tiered services that respond to individual needs. Is the policy inclusive of all learners? Does the policy consider grouping, curricular, and instructional modifications? Does the policy allow for horizontal and vertical articulation? Does it convey the school's or district's vision for student success? Is the new/revised policy either adding value to existing policies or filling a policy vacuum?
- *Implementation Considerations.* What are the implications for budget? What mechanisms are in place for communication, disseminating information, and providing technical assistance to ensure the operationalization of the new/revised policy?
- *Study the Fidelity of Policy Implementation.* Determine policy efficacy through gathering student and program data.

RtI serves as a valuable framework for conversations about policy development because of its potential utility in providing appropriate learning experiences for all students as well as early identification of students who lack an appropriate match of instructional and curricular choices. Developing a set of action steps for policy development is a way to undergird school practices with the necessary infrastructure.

Conclusion

In the absence of federal laws or mandates governing gifted education, state and local policy are the cornerstone driving gifted education programming in school systems across the United States. The need for coherent policies in gifted education that address the components of RtI is an opportunity to bring a comprehensive perspective—one from special education, gifted education, and general education—to the table to create policies that address differentiation, tiered services, and teacher education from a common framework. As the use of state standards and accountability measures intensify, the gifted field will find it necessary to use policies as the base for creating an infrastructure to support student growth. The way we approach the practice of education is experiencing tidal waves. There are competing demands for limited resources. We can ill afford to operate on separate agendas if we want to address the need for developing optimal opportunities for our best learners. The essential question is how to embrace the betterment of all learners, including the gifted. As a result, considering a model such as RtI affords the field an opportunity to partner with regular education and special education in developing policies undergirded by research that are more dynamic and comprehensive in nature by merging and integrating the best of each field. Gifted learners and indeed all learners' educational futures depend upon it. GCT

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