

# Remaining Challenges

## for the Use of RtI With Gifted Education

by Claire E. Hughes, Karen Rollins, Susan K. Johnsen, Daphne A. Pereles, Stuart Omdal, Lois Baldwin, Elissa F. Brown, Sherry H. Abernethy, and Mary Ruth Coleman



In preparation of this special issue, we asked contributing authors to think about the challenges that might be faced if gifted education moves toward an RtI approach. The following shared challenges can be used as discussion points for planning and reflection.

### Overall Challenges for RtI

#### RtI as Systemic Change

Response to Intervention has many positive features that will help students not only succeed, but when paired

with a strand that incorporates gifted, could even help students reach their potential. However, RtI will not be successful unless it is viewed as a systemic process that involves systemic change. For change to occur at the classroom level, it also must involve administrative support at the school and district levels. If implementation is not done systemically, RtI will meet with limited success.

#### Program Intent and Philosophy

Employing RtI as a framework for gifted programming requires that programming be inclusive rather than

exclusive because of the emphasis on universal screening and proactively responding to students' needs based on formative and curriculum-based assessment. Many gifted programs and state policies still operate with an "exclusivity" model wherein only students whose aptitude or achievement scores fall within a range above the mean can receive services. Using an RtI model to design policy would challenge assumptions around narrow definitions and identification processes for determining who is gifted and would include the nurturing of potential as part of services. A challenge for gifted education teachers and administrators is adjusting to a major change in the identification process. For decades, the first step in the gifted education process was identifying who was and was not "gifted." The label became the key to services and programming. When students display the characteristics and/or behaviors associated with giftedness and the school system is poised to respond to those documented academic needs for enrichment and/or acceleration, the need for the gifted label is no longer the "gatekeeper" to services and programming associated with gifted and talented education.

### Budget and Resource Implications

There are budget implications if gifted education employs an RtI approach for teacher preparation, curriculum and assessment materials, program implementation, and program evaluation. Given current budgetary constraints for gifted funding in federal and state budgets, this remains a challenge. New and collaborative approaches to funding will have to be developed to ensure resources for nurturing, recognizing, and responding to the strengths of all children. Collaborative approaches might include resources from: (a) Title

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I enrichment funds, (b) technology funds for distance learning, (c) media center funds for challenging learning materials, (d) curriculum funds for rigorous high-end classes, and (e) special education or 504 funds for twice-exceptional learners. Just as greater collaboration is needed for service delivery, greater collaboration also is needed to pool resources and reduce the fragmentation of supports.

### Leadership

When establishing RtI on a campus, all personnel and all departments must work together in a cohesive fashion in order for the process to work. Most importantly, administration must provide good leadership in order to encourage and foster change. This leadership must come from not only district administrators such as superintendents, curriculum specialists, and special program directors, but also from campus principals, vice principals, and campus leaders. RtI is a complex system that requires vision, strong leadership, and collaboration. Granted, all personnel must do their part in establishing the system and working with students, but it is the job of administrators to facilitate the change and problem solve for the campus every step of the way.

### Professional Development

Staff will need training on differentiated instruction and enrichment strategies to enhance instruction for students identified as gifted. Teachers will need an understanding of how to expand curriculum to challenge these identified learners. Additionally, school leaders must have training and commitment to the approach as a way to scaffold learning for all learners. RtI training and long-term follow-up also will be an essential component of expanding the capacity to support the change.

## Challenges for Schools and Classrooms Implementing RtI

### Implementing Differentiated Strategies Within Tier 1

For RtI to be responsive to gifted and talented students, differentiation needs to occur at the Tier 1 level in all core subject areas. In this way, students who have strengths in one subject area and who exhibit a disability in another may receive appropriate interventions. In the case of gifted students, these interventions might include adding depth and complexity to the content, faster pacing, independent study, choices among assignments,

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above-grade-level activities, curriculum compacting, tiered assignments, and so on. It is not easy for teachers to provide for a wide range of differences in the classroom. Teachers need to have flexibility in their curriculum and in the activities that they use in the classroom. A standard curriculum will not address each student's strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, teachers need to have access to a variety of curricular materials so that they can intervene with individual students.

### Collaboration

Administrators, special education teachers, gifted education teachers, and other support personnel need to assist the general education teacher in implementing varied interventions and in reviewing the assessment information to determine their effectiveness. Moreover, this support needs to be ongoing and help the teacher learn how to manage a wide range of differences in the classroom. Management techniques might include the use of flexible grouping, a variety of activities, student record keeping, learning stations, flexible pacing and scheduling, and independent studies. With curricular and instructional support, there is a greater likelihood that appropriate support can occur at the Tier 1 level and all students will receive instruction that adapts to their abilities and disabilities.

### Research-Based Instructional Practices

In both RtI's approaches for special education students (e.g., standard protocol and problem solving), there is an emphasis on research-based practices so that students who need more intensive services or services beyond the general education classroom actually need them and do not receive them because

they received inadequate instruction. Just as in special education, gifted education needs to clearly identify practices that have evidence to support their use. Research support enables the teacher to select the most effective programs, materials, and instructional strategies for gifted students. The challenge for those involved in research is getting these best practices into the hands of teachers who provide direct services to students. Too frequently, curriculum and instructional strategies are based upon opinion, habit, or tradition. To encourage more data-based decision-making when interventions are selected, researchers need to make their results more accessible to practitioners. Similarly, practitioners need to ask the question "Is there any research evidence to support this practice?"

In gifted education, several books have been written regarding best practices (Callahan & Plucker, 2008; Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007). These books address a variety of areas that include topics such as flexible grouping, compacting the curriculum, higher level thinking, and instructional strategies within specific curriculum domains. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) also has initiated a project for analyzing and determining which evidence should be used to support a particular practice (CEC, 2008). CEC has developed specific criteria for reviewing articles that use certain research designs. As these practices are validated, CEC plans on disseminating them to schools and teachers. Teachers also may choose to take an active role in developing an evidence base by using action research in their classroom. Action research involves problem solving similar to the RtI approach. Baseline information is collected on a student's academic or behavioral progress, an intervention is applied, more data are collected, and decisions are made about the

effectiveness of the intervention. If the intervention is working, it is continued; if not, another intervention is implemented. Action research has the potential to generate new effective interventions for all students.

### Developing Decision Points for More Intensive Services

Among educators, a major issue is determining the point when students need more intensive services. When does the teacher refer a child for special education or for gifted education? What constitutes inadequate progress or progress that requires more than what the general education classroom can provide? What assessments should be used in this more comprehensive level of evaluation? Highly gifted students may need radical acceleration (e.g., even though they are elementary students, they are ready to learn calculus), intensive counseling (e.g., they are very different in terms of their interests and maturity from their same-age peers), or other out-of-school activities (e.g., mentoring, competitions, dual-enrollment options). Decision-making guidelines must be created that include these kinds of high-end options.

### Changes in Assessment

Progress monitoring to determine needs in intensity of instruction and strategies will be required when implementing an RtI model. Appropriate assessment tools and strategies will need to be identified to determine accelerated knowledge and potential growth of gifted students. This will require the general education teacher to use assessments that are above grade level. Such assessments are not commonly used because state-mandated tests are tightly aligned to grade-level expectations. The inclusion of above-grade-level assessments or those that

assess what gifted students know is a challenge within the RtI model. To be truly useful, teachers will need assessment data documenting when a child had progressed well beyond the expected classroom curriculum. In addition, assessments should help formally identified students so that resources can be provided for more intensive services.

### Specific Remaining Challenges for Twice-Exceptional Students in RtI

Concurrent with modifications that address their individual strengths and interests, gifted students with disabilities also should be receiving interventions that directly impact the area in which they are experiencing difficulty. This dual set of needs complicates identification and service delivery and so the following specific concerns are noted for RtI with twice-exceptional learners:

- If the school system is not utilizing RtI as a comprehensive system for all students, then academic acceleration would not be part of the potential options in the screening/intervention process. This can be a problem, not only for gifted students but especially for twice-exceptional students.
- If the system is only focused on “struggling learners,” then there will be a tendency to focus on the remedial needs of twice-exceptional students rather than putting a critical emphasis on their abilities.
- Lack of awareness of the characteristics of twice-exceptional students can greatly impact whether or not the academic, social, and emotional needs of these students are addressed.

- Because their gifts and higher level thinking often mask their disability, twice-exceptional students may appear to be very average in the classroom setting. The expectation is that schoolwide screening for strengths and interests, as well as academic challenges, would identify possible concerns. If the classroom teacher does not observe any perceived problems, as in the potential for much higher achievement, or below-grade-level expectations in an academic subject, the student may never be referred to the problem-solving team.
- Many twice-exceptional students get noticed because of their negative behaviors. This can cause a focus on the behavior rather than the underlying academic problem that may be contributing to the negative behavior. It also can interfere with any recognition of ability or gift.
- If the process is done with fidelity and includes a strength-based approach, these issues should not be a concern. But, the fidelity of implementation is inconsistent at best.

### Concluding Thoughts on Challenges for RtI With Gifted Education

Change is a difficult process and systemic change is even more difficult. Roles and responsibilities will change. Questions without answers will be asked. Parents and students will need to be informed. An administrator who can listen, empathize, and foster energy will go far with the implementation of RtI. As long as there is positive energy and successful leadership in place, the systemic change can at least be less painful, and the rewards reaped, such as happier, successful students, will be worth the effort.

Questions that may need to be explored to facilitate the systemic change of RtI include:

- What RtI framework will provide the blueprint of change?
- How will the current services for gifted learners fit with this framework?
- How will roles and responsibilities change?
- How can anxieties about the systemic change be eased?
- What levels of collaboration need to be established?
- How will the needs of high-potential children from culturally and linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged families be addressed?
- How will long-term follow-up for students be provided and by whom?
- How will parents be informed of changes?
- Who will be the “go-to” person when questions arise?

In spite of the remaining challenges, the authors conclude that RtI is certainly changing the face of education and that gifted education must examine its fit with these changes. **GCT**

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