

A Prescription for Success

*What Every Educator Needs to Know
About Response to Intervention
and Differentiated Instruction*



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What Every Educator Needs to Know About Response to Intervention and Differentiated Instruction

After a lengthy wait in the reception area, you're finally called back to the examination room. You perch on the table and clutch a sheet around your torso, failing miserably to preserve your modesty. Coat flapping, the doctor rushes in and nods. She sits on the twirling stool and begins scribbling prescriptions on a pad. Moments later she hands you the prescriptions and asks, "Any questions?"

You're so stunned you can barely react, but you say, "Why did you write these prescriptions? You haven't examined me. You don't even know why I'm here!"

The doctor replies, "Well, most of my patients require medication to lower their cholesterol, control high blood pressure, and manage arthritis, so I thought we'd just start there and see how things go."

Unlikely? You bet. Inappropriate? Absolutely!

Today's physicians are too well trained, too responsible, and too concerned about litigation to prescribe a one-size-fits-all healthcare solution for their patients. They make informed decisions based on careful examinations, test results, and conversations with the patients in their care. And after treatment begins, they continue to monitor each patient's response and make adjustments as needed.

That same expert-driven, responsive protocol is already being followed by thousands of teachers in classrooms across the country through the consistent use of differentiated instructional (DI) practices. And now with the support of federal initiatives, even more educators will be empowered to be highly responsive in assisting at-risk students and reducing the overidentification of students with learning disabilities.



Numerous studies support the effectiveness of early intervention, including:

- ▶ The National Reading Panel (2000)
- ▶ The National Research Council Panel on Minority Overrepresentation (2002)
- ▶ The National Summit on Learning Disabilities (2001)
- ▶ The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002)
- ▶ The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities Common Ground Report (2002)
- ▶ The National Institute for Child Health and Development (ongoing)

What Are Early Intervening Services?

In 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (**IDEA 2004**) was reauthorized. An essential new element of the law stresses the need for prevention-focused instructional practices to be used in the regular education classroom. These “**Early Intervening Services**” (EIS) are intended to help students who have not been identified as eligible for special education but require additional academic or behavioral support in order to succeed in the regular education classroom.

The goal of EIS is to combat the rising proportion of students identified with learning disabilities and the overidentification of minority students for special education services by requiring consistent use of best practices in regular education classrooms. While these EIS are focused on elementary students, the effects are far-reaching and evident even in secondary settings. Numerous studies, including Speece, Case, and Molloy (2003), have found that the earlier such interventions take place, the better the outcomes are for at-risk learners.

To support this initiative, IDEA 2004 allows a district to use **up to 15 percent** of its special education funds for:

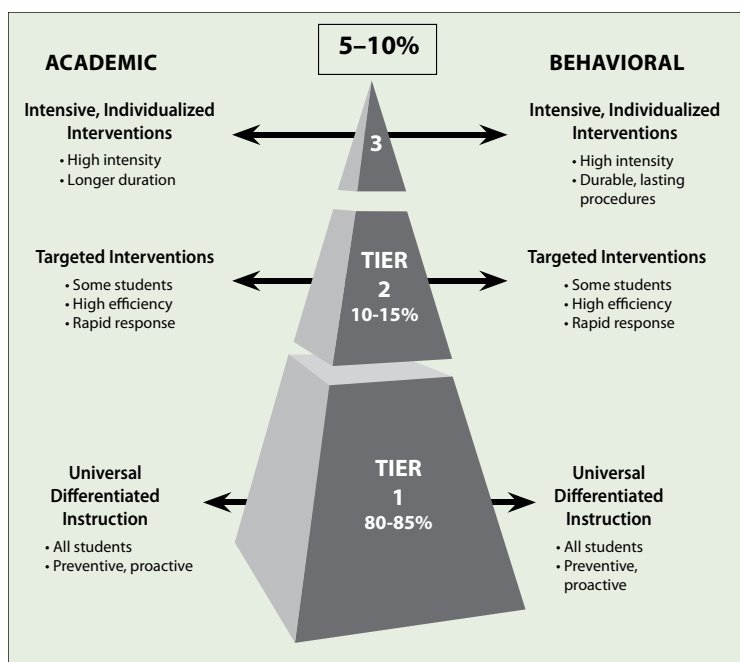
- Ongoing professional development that enables teachers and other school staff to develop greater expertise in the delivery of scientifically based academic instruction and behavioral interventions
- Educational and behavioral evaluations, services, and supports

What is Response to Intervention?

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a general education initiative written into the special education law IDEA 2004. Its purpose is to offer educators a framework in which to structure Early Intervening Services. At its core, RTI aims to support at-risk students by removing barriers to learning.

The RTI approach emerged from multiple long-term studies which indicate that nearly every student can learn when differentiated instructional strategies, expert-driven instruction, and a scientifically validated curriculum are used in the regular classroom.

The RTI process involves gathering and examining assessment data. Educators use the results to judge the effectiveness of the interventions used with students and to determine appropriate new instructional plans.

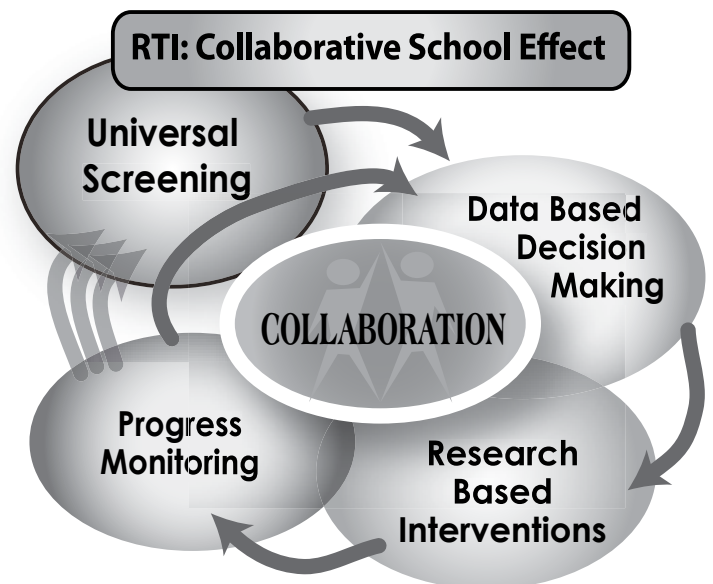


Although much is being written about three- and four-tier RTI structures, it is important to understand that no specific RTI model is prescribed or detailed in the law, and that RTI is not going to happen overnight. Most experts suggest a three-to-five-year time line for successful implementation. **Bottom line: RTI is about responsive teaching that benefits all learners.** *Let's take a closer look.*



Five Essential Elements

1. Under an RTI framework, schools must embrace a comprehensive **universal screening** process that is administered with fidelity to all students. School-wide screenings are repeated periodically during the year, and the results are used to guide instructional decisions.
2. Classroom teachers represent the first line of early intervention. They are expected to implement **high-quality, evidence-based instruction** matched to a student's learning needs as identified through the screening process and classroom assessments.
3. RTI requires the **progress of all students**, especially those at risk, to be monitored and documented closely in the regular education classroom. The **data** flowing from curriculum-based measures enable the teacher to assess an individual student's response to the strategies or interventions being used and provide instructional options respectful of different learning needs. At some point, a school may choose to include behavior as an area of student development to be monitored and addressed within the RTI framework.
4. Even in classrooms following the RTI framework, some students may fail to thrive. If a learner consistently demonstrates the need for additional support, the classroom teacher can share the results of intervention efforts already undertaken in the classroom and **work collaboratively with colleagues in a student support team** to explore additional instructional options. Although educating the "whole child" is not directly addressed in RTI, the team will typically consider readiness levels and outside influences that might affect a student's achievement as it considers its options.





5. If the collaborative team and classroom teacher determine, based on the data and documentation, that the student requires support in addition to the prescriptive instruction already being provided in the classroom, supplemental services are arranged. IDEA 2004 allows at-risk students to receive **supplemental support without a disability label**. This additional help is typically coordinated with other school-based services and personnel including Title 1, ESL/ELL, special education, specialists, coaches, and support staff. Under an RTI framework, students failing to respond to supplementary instruction may be given more intensive support on an individualized basis.

What About Identification of a Learning Disability?

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act states that a student who consistently performs below state-approved, grade-level standards on scientifically validated interventions, and who fails to respond successfully to additional supports, may be determined to have a learning disability. So schools following an RTI framework now have an important and proactive alternative to the “wait-to-fail” or IQ-achievement discrepancy model used in the past. For a student consistently failing to respond to interventions of increasing intensity, a special education referral team would then initiate a comprehensive evaluation. The goal would be to find out why the student’s performance differs significantly from that of state-approved, grade-level standards and to determine the most appropriate educational services to provide.

DI, RTI, and EIS—A Clear Connection?

Diversity in our classrooms is something we must anticipate, accept, and address (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers who use differentiated instruction in their classrooms are already offering the expert-driven, responsive, student-centered instruction that RTI and EIS require. The following examples highlight some of the important practices followed in a DI classroom:

- Instruction is standards-based, student-centered, and rooted in assessment.
- Educators teach in ways that fit learners rather than forcing learners to fit their own instructional preferences.
- There is consistent use of best instructional practices and materials that are grounded in research.
- Teachers consistently offer multiple avenues through which students can master essential content and skills and demonstrate their learning.



What Does All this Mean to Teachers?

Teaching styles are likely to change as Response to Intervention takes shape in your district and building. Depending on your expertise in differentiated instruction and assessment, that change may be slight or could require a major transformation in how you plan, present, monitor, assess, and adjust instruction. It will also most likely require you to engage in professional development in these areas. Consider the following questions:

- In your classroom, which best describes your role—a presenter, a coach, or a facilitator? Why?
- What role do pre-assessments play in your planning and instruction?
- How often do you provide multiple ways for students to master essential concepts and skills?
- How frequently do your students work in small groups based on their different interests, levels of readiness, or learning preferences?
- Are your students involved in regular self-assessment? How?
- Do you typically use one type of summative assessment, or can students demonstrate mastery of new concepts and skills in more than one way?
- How comfortable are you with research-based strategies such as Think Alouds, Reciprocal Teaching, Anticipation Guides, or Text Activity Guides?
- Are tiered assignments, RAFT projects, and anchor activities part of your professional skill set?

Instructional strategies are essential, but a comprehensive RTI framework requires more. Not only must lesson plan formats reflect responsive teaching practices, but grade books, portfolios, and other record-keeping systems will likewise evolve under RTI. In fact, probably the biggest change for teachers already using differentiated instructional strategies will be the need to adopt more systematic ways to track a student's rate of improvement (ROI). Under the RTI framework, data derived from a student's responses to different interventions is used to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of instructional efforts
- Guide future planning decisions
- Determine a learner's need for more intensive support
- Establish the presence or absence of a learning disability

So, if you have a variety of DI strategies and documentation tools in your repertoire, you should feel confident that you are ready for the changes ahead.



The Impact on School-Based Service Personnel...

Collaboration and consultation are words you will live by under RTI. If you are a school psychologist, you may do more observing and consulting than completing eligibility evaluations. Those of you with special education certification will share your expertise and assist with supplemental instruction for at-risk learners. Many of you will be asked to serve, at some point, on an intervention planning or instructional support team and to use your particular expertise to plan interventions and instructional pathways. As with classroom teachers, many of you will also need to determine the right professional development for yourself so you can be an effective part of a problem-solving intervention team. Take a moment to reflect on some other key questions:

- How would you describe the collaborative relationships you have with classroom teachers in your building?
- What is your level of familiarity with state standards and expectations for general education students?
- Are you familiar with the curricular materials and instructional strategies used by your general education colleagues?
- How will you need to modify your current routines or role to support these Early Intervening Services offered through the RTI framework?
- What specific conversations are you going to need to have in your building before implementing RTI?

Administrators, Your World is Changing Too!

Have you carefully considered how RTI will affect general education teachers and specialists in your building? Good. Now take a moment to consider the questions below:

- What additional professional development and expertise will you need in order to serve as an effective instructional leader under the RTI framework?
- Do you have a clear understanding of the suggested RTI time line and the components of the RTI framework, such as documentation, that will need to be developed and nurtured with your staff?
- Do you have personal experience utilizing differentiated instructional strategies?
- What impact will RTI have on your staff development and school improvement plans?
- What support will your staff require to overcome the special challenges related to planning and teaching collaboratively under an RTI framework? How will you ensure that teachers are carrying out assessments, interventions, and documentation with fidelity?

- What are your thoughts when you see classrooms where students work silently and instruction is primarily teacher-led?
- When you evaluate teachers, what expectations do you have for their consistent use of responsive interventions? Will these expectations need to change?
- When preparing a master schedule, what changes will you need to make in order to support an RTI framework?
- Have you considered potential legal issues that could stem from RTI?
- What impact will all this have on how you allocate resources to maximize learning?
- How might this initiative help you address NCLB?



The Whole Child

Child advocate Jim Grant reminds us, “*More than a child’s head enters your school each day.*” As we consider RTI and educating the whole child, we must also remember that parents are crucial partners in this mission. Ongoing efforts must be made to help families understand how and why classroom instruction is being transformed and to recognize the benefits these changes bring to all learners. We must also keep families apprised of any supplemental instruction their students are receiving so they can support those intervention efforts.

Only Fools Rush In...

At this point, are you feeling dizzy and unsure about where to start? That’s a natural response to any major paradigm shift, so slow down, breathe deeply, and consider the following:

- There are *many* unanswered questions related to RTI.
- In spite of the hype, there is no specific RTI model that must be followed.
- Many things you’re already doing support RTI expectations.
- The suggested time line for RTI implementation is three to five years, so take one step at a time.
- It all boils down to the consistent use of best instructional practices that benefit all learners.

Richard Allington is past president of the International Reading Association (IRA). In a 2006 *Reading Today* article, “Research and the Three-Tier Model,” he stressed, “High-quality reading instruction cannot be boxed up and shipped to a site.”



In this time of transition, we must resist the temptation to look for a quick fix simply by buying a prepackaged RTI program. Success won't come from adding layers of supplemental curriculum. It will come through responsive or prescriptive instruction in the regular education classroom and data-based decision making. As responsible educators we must focus on two essentials:

1. Creating conditions within schools to facilitate regular collaboration through thoughtful scheduling, joint planning and flexible use of resources.
2. On-going staff development through conferences, seminars, on-site training, and online learning so teachers are equipped to provide differentiated instruction using research-based instructional and behavioral interventions.

A Long-Term View...

The successful rollout of RTI isn't a one-time event, but rather a new way of "doing school." It may take you and your colleagues several years to become comfortable with it, and it requires a culture in which we serve as problem-solvers collaborating to foster student success.

Preparing teachers, developing responsive routines, and establishing procedures that support this initiative are critical. Thoughtful conversations within our schools and in the broader community will ensure Early Intervening Services and a Response to Intervention framework that benefit *all* learners and dramatically improve the odds for those students at greatest risk.

Print Resources

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Online Resources

www.rtinetwork.org
www.rti4success.org

To learn more about related professional development resources and opportunities, visit www.SDE.com/RTI.



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