

**RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION:
HIGH STANDARDS FOR A NEW LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT**

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Introduction

At its core, Response to Intervention (RtI) is what good teachers have always done, which is to monitor how well their students are doing and provide extra help to the children they see falling behind. With RtI the process of ongoing assessment and intervention is formalized, supported by scientifically based instructional methods, enabled by recent advances in information technology and applied consistently across the district or state.

Initially proposed as a way to give education authorities a more accurate and evidenced-based method for determining which students should be identified as having learning disabilities (LD), RtI has yielded unexpected benefits for children who may be struggling in the regular classroom but who have the ability to meet the standards of the curriculum if they are provided with extra help (an intervention) early in the teaching and learning cycle, before they fall too far behind to catch up.

One unique and important feature of RtI – elevating it above some of the education fads that have come and gone in the past few decades -- is that the RtI process is designed to monitor and evaluate its own effectiveness on an ongoing basis. In other words, it is not just the performance of the student at risk of failure that is being measured. With RtI, the curriculum and the interventions employed to help that student are also monitored for results and adjusted at every stage. This is done to ensure that the child’s learning problem is not with the curriculum itself.¹

The continuous feedback nature of RtI is also beneficial in making certain teachers remain fully trained and up to speed on the education standards to be met and the tools available for achieving them with a more diverse student body with different and varying levels of ability. As RtI programs continue to gain acceptance and grow in number, educators will see a need to begin working more closely with education training programs and schools, to ensure that more teachers are coming into the field ready to address the needs of struggling students within a RtI framework.

As a former education official, I know from personal experience how important ongoing communication, continuous feedback and self-assessment is to the success of any intervention effort.

¹ Education|Evolving, Response to Education: An alternative to traditional eligibility criteria for students with disabilities, Robert J. Wedl, July, 2005

At the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina, where I was honored to serve as chairman of the Board of Education before coming to McGraw-Hill, we had a population of Grade 3 and 5 students who were not meeting state reading standards. All of our attempts to help these children failed to yield results until someone thought to ask “have the teachers been informed about what the state standards actually are?” It turned out they had not. After we spent some time and resources rectifying this, Grades 3 and 5 went from a 40 to an 80 percent success rate in meeting the state’s reading requirements.

The lesson is that teacher professional development is essential to the successful implementation of any intervention program, but it is just one factor among three that must be present for RtI to succeed.

When implemented properly, RtI is a three-legged stool supported by:

1. High and consistent standards for achievement;
2. Ongoing, scientifically based assessments and instructional practices that are continually evaluated and adjusted for efficacy; and
3. Teachers and teacher aides who have been trained properly in the implementation of the RtI assessment and intervention process.

If any one of those three legs is missing, the stool will not stand.

The efforts of parents, extended family and other adults important to the student outside of school are also key to academic achievement. RtI can help there, too. By formalizing and establishing clear, evidence-based standards for identifying struggling students, RtI can provide a structure and a roadmap for involving the support and encouragement of others beyond school, both within the family and the community at large.

With the Obama Administration’s fiscal stimulus package poised to provide the largest number of dollars ever allocated to public education,² this is an excellent time to use some of those resources in support of RtI programs, to establish clear standards, research the best approaches to RtI and train teachers in their implementation.

² SRA/Wright Group 2009 Response to Intervention Solutions Virtual Conference, An Expert Conversation: The impact of the Stimulus on Intervention Solutions, Michael Casserly, Dan Domenech, Arthur Griffin, Jr.

How RtI Works

RtI is made possible by recent innovations in digital technology that allow educators to process tremendous amounts of student data quickly and accurately, then use that information to develop instructional strategies and materials that can be tailored to individual student needs.

RtI means different things to different people in the education field and there are many ways of implementing an RtI program. All versions involve some method of integrating ongoing student progress assessment with evidenced-based interventions to identify and help students deemed at risk for poor learning outcomes.³

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) encourages the adoption of RtI but does not specify or recommend any particular model. The department does clearly identify and endorse core characteristics that it believes underpin all RtI models. These are:

- High-quality, research-based instruction in students' general education settings;
- Continuous monitoring of student performance;
- Screening for academic and behavioral problems; and
- Multiple levels (tiers) of instruction that are progressively more intense based on a student's response to instruction and interventions.⁴

Most RtI systems use a three-tiered approach, according to the National Association of Special Education Directors, although there are advocates for a fourth tier. Regardless of tier number, the intensity of the intervention is based on an individual student's response at each level.

- Tier 1 incorporates the general student population before any intervention. There is no precise definition of Tier 1, but it is generally meant to identify students who are receiving "evidenced-based instruction" or "high quality instruction" or, with regard to reading, "an instructional program ... with balanced, explicit, and systematic instruction that fosters both code-based and text and text-based strategies for word identification and comprehension."⁵
- Tier 2 interventions are provided for students who demonstrate problems meeting achievement standards in the Tier 1 group. In addition to general classroom instruction, students at the Tier 2 level might receive regular and scheduled additional instruction in small group settings designed to enhance fundamental skills.
- Tier 3 (and above) interventions are for students who do not respond to Tier 2 efforts. This can involve individual tutoring and a mix of instructional interventions along with ongoing analysis of student performance data.

³ Market Brief – Response to Intervention, MHE Learning Group internal document.

⁴ Market Brief – Response to Intervention, MHE Learning Group internal document, quoting the DOE.

⁵ Institute of Education Sciences, *Assisting Students Struggling with Readings: Response to Intervention and Multi-Tier Intervention in Primary Grades*, Feb. 2009, quoting Vaughn and Fuchs (2006), Division for Learning Disabilities (2007) and Valentino, Scanlon, Small, Fanuele, and Sweeney (2007), respectively.

Those students who do not respond at the higher tiers may need more intensive educational services or ultimately be identified as having a “learning disability” (LD) or “a severe learning disability” (SLD).

Noted RtI researchers Donald and Lynn S. Fuchs have likened the RtI assessment and intervention model to the multi-tiered health care model, where frequent check-ups are used to detect early warning signs of potential health problems, followed by increasing levels of intervention to head them off or prevent them from becoming serious.⁶

History of RtI

RtI came about initially in response to the over-identification of special education students. Many educators were concerned that too many students were being identified as having a learning disability – not because they actually had one, “but because they had not been successful in a general education program.”⁷ Many were also concerned that students with a true LD were not receiving the help they needed quickly enough.

Before RtI, the accepted method for identifying students with LD was the IQ/Achievement Discrepancy model. This was often referred to as the “wait to fail” approach because students could not receive additional attention until a discrepancy between expected performance (based on IQ test results) and an observed deficiency could be demonstrated conclusively over time. This method of identification delayed added resources for students who really needed it until remediation became difficult, was applied inconsistently, and often resulted in mis-identification in both directions.⁸

During the years between the 1997 passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 2004 Reauthorization (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, or IDEIA), a consensus formed among education professionals that the traditional IQ/Achievement Discrepancy model for identifying students who had a LD was not working.

An article in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* noted “[r]esearch findings indicate that substantial proportions of school-identified LD students – from 52 to 70 percent – fail to meet state or federal eligibility criteria.” G. Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Child and Human Development went so far as to suggest that under the then current identification guidelines LD had become “a sociological sponge to wipe up the spills of general education.”⁹

⁶ SRA/Wright Group 2009 Response to Intervention Solutions Virtual Conference, Responsiveness to Education: A new context for Special Education and General Education Reform,

⁷ Why Adopt an RTI Model?, David P. Prasse, Ph.D., Loyola University, www.rtinetwork.com/

⁸ Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly & Vaughn, 2004; Fuchs, et. al., 2003; Gersten & Dimino 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006, referred to in LDOnline (<http://www.ldonline.org/>) Response-to-Instruction and Universal Design for Learning: How Might They Intersect in the General Education Classroom, Nicole Strangeman, et. al., (2006).

⁹ Gresham, F. H., MacMillan, D. L., & Bocian, K. M. (1996). Learning disabilities, low achievement, and mild mental retardation: More alike than different? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29 (6), 570-581.

Dr. Robert Pasternack, former Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services provided a similar if more measured opinion in his testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, telling Congress that:

“[U]sing IQ discrepancy between the test and performance is not always an indicator of a learning disability. Indeed, some research indicates that if a child who reads slowly has IQ scores that are above average, that child might receive services under IDEA based on the discrepancy between the IQ scores and the reading ability. On the other hand, another child who also reads slowly but has IQ scores that are average may not receive any services because of the lack of a significant discrepancy. **Such approaches to assessment may clearly result in some children who need services not getting them while others who do not need them will receive them.**” [Emphasis added.]¹⁰

Based on the testimony of Pasternack and others, a statute was added to the 2004 IDEIA requiring school districts to use some form of scientifically based research to guide intervention decisions,¹¹ and allowing districts to use up to 15 percent of their IDEIA funds:

“to develop and implement coordinated, early intervention services for students who have not been identified as needing special education or related services, but who need additional academic or behavioral support to succeed in a general education environment.”¹²

What may have begun as a way of aiding the identification and referral of students with LD had become a framework for systematic, individually focused intervention with the potential to improve learning outcomes for all students generally.¹³

Current State of RtI – A Snapshot

Since 2004, every state has incorporated an RtI model framework or initiative, or has published guidelines for districts to use in crafting their own evidenced-based evaluation and intervention programs.

In April 2009, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), Spectrum K12 School Solutions and State Title 1 Directors joined together to conduct their third annual web-based survey of K-12 district administrators to gauge the extent to which RtI has been adopted and implemented.

¹⁰ Education|Evolving, Response to Education: An alternative to traditional eligibility criteria for students with disabilities, Robert J. Wedl, July, 2005.

¹¹ Education|Evolving, Response to Education: An alternative to traditional eligibility criteria for students with disabilities, Robert J. Wedl, July, 2005.

¹² Quoted in Market Brief – Response to Intervention, MHE Learning Group internal document.

¹³ LDOnline (<http://www.ldonline.org/>) Response-to-Instruction and Universal Design for Learning: How Might They Intersect in the General Education Classroom, Nicole Strangeman, et. al., (2006).

Among their findings were the following:

- Adoption and implementation rates for RtI have continued to rise in 2009, with 71 percent of respondents saying their districts are either piloting a RtI program, in the process of district-wide implementation, or have RtI in district-wide use (versus 60 percent in 2008 and 44 percent in 2007);
- RtI is increasingly being introduced across all grade levels, with a significant increase in high school implementation (51 percent having some level of implementation in 2009 compared to 16 percent in 2008);
- Eighty percent of districts do not yet have enough data to determine if RtI leads to an improvement in AYP. Of the districts with sufficient data, more than twice as many report RtI led to an improvement in AYP than those reporting no improvement;
- Of districts with enough data, 83 percent indicated RtI has reduced the number of referrals to special education;
- Most districts are using a three-tier model of RtI, with 79 percent of districts reporting the use of three tiers, up from 73 percent in 2008; and
- A majority of districts continue to report RtI implementation is being led through a unified effort between general education and special education.

The survey found that key obstacles to the effective implementation of RtI were:

- Insufficient teacher training;
- Lack of intervention resources; and
- Lack of data, knowledge, skills for tracking and charting.¹⁴

Conclusion

More experience in the field and more data are needed to truly assess the strengths of RtI and potential challenges to its successful implementation. But among RtI's greatest strengths, I believe, is its approach to helping children achieve.

The difference between Response to Intervention and previous assessment and intervention methods is the difference between a treasure hunt and a witch hunt. The old model looked for what was wrong with children and focused on what they didn't understand. The new model

¹⁴ Response to Intervention(RtI) Adoption Survey 2009, American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), Spectrum K12 School Solutions and State Title 1 Directors

looks at what they do understand and attempts to build upon that spark to nurture their development and encourage their future achievement.

As William Butler Yeats wrote: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

In the end, it all comes back, as it always has, to the interaction between the teacher and the student in the classroom. All theories and systems of education must be focused on helping the teacher to light that fire.

Over the past few decades society has changed, demographics have changed and the capabilities of technology have certainly changed. The model of a teacher standing in front of a classroom and lecturing to a homogenized group of students can no longer work because student populations have become so diverse. Teachers today must be more like orchestra conductors than lecturers. They must have the ability to facilitate learning among various and diverse groups of students from different backgrounds and with different levels of achievement.

The McGraw-Hill School Education Group, through its SRA/McGraw-Hill and Wright Group/McGraw-Hill divisions, offer a comprehensive array of research-based intervention resources for both language arts and mathematics to help educators in implementing RtI programs and encourage learning. One I am particularly excited about is the new third generation of MyGuide, which can provide an instant individualized education plan (IEP) for children receiving attention under IDEA.

But at McGraw-Hill, we want to do more than just offer products. We want to be part of the conversation that helps to determine what tools are needed most to make RtI truly effective.

On April 8, 2009, we launched the SRA/Wright Group Response to Intervention virtual conference for school principals and district leaders. We came up with the idea for a virtual conference so that we could better serve our customers by bringing together a great deal of the current knowledge about RtI in one place. More than 400 educators logged on the first day and were able to attend general sessions with experts, learn more about RtI intervention strategies and network with other educators.

In addition, we have launched a website – www.InterventionResources.com -- where educators can create their own customized solutions based on their specific intervention needs.

Listening to our customers and creating products directly tailored to their needs is essential – not only to our success as a provider of educational tools and content – but for the success of our nation’s educational system. Education companies, educators, parents and students must strive to create a continuous loop of customized feedback and instruction to drive more effective education solutions and to ensure that new systems such as RtI are developed and implemented to achieve positive and measurable results.

Speaking in Denver on May 28, 2008, then presidential candidate Obama said: "As president, I will work with our nation's governors and educators to create and use assessments that can improve achievement all across America"

Response to Intervention is one of the tools that can truly help teachers to make a difference in the classroom for their students, realize President Obama's education goals, and improve education outcomes for U.S. students at all achievement levels.

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