

# SPOTLIGHT



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## RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

### EDITOR'S NOTE

Response to Intervention is a model to identify students in need and provide targeted interventions. In this Spotlight, learn why RTI may fall short in flagging certain students, practical lessons on multitiered systems of supports, and how RTI can be used to support teachers.

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# RTI May Fall Short in Flagging Certain Students

## Learning disabilities reported as soft spot

By Christina A. Samuels

**A**s a method of organizing efforts to help students who are struggling academically, response to intervention has seen widespread adoption. But as an improved method of identifying students with learning disabilities, RTI shows far less clear benefits, researchers are finding.

The RTI instructional model is designed to identify students in need of extra assistance and provide them targeted and research-based lessons, or interventions. In the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Congress said that school districts were permitted to use a student's response to such interventions as part of an evaluation process for specific learning disabilities, the largest disability category.

But the federal government declined to tell districts and states exactly how such a process should work, saying that was the role of local educators to determine. And states have also tended to take a hands-off approach at giving directives to individual districts.

The result, according to surveys of district and state special education leaders being highlighted this week: a wide variation across districts on several important issues, such as when parents are notified that their children are receiving intensive services through an RTI model, how long a student must receive interventions before being referred for a comprehensive evaluation, and whether any data are reported to the state so that officials can spot potential areas of concern.

"The problem is the variability in trying to get schools and districts, and districts and states, in communication with each other," said Tina M. Hudson, an assistant professor of special education at East Tennessee State University and one of the researchers who conducted the survey of state and district-level special education administrators. "We need more of a unified approach to this."

Robert G. McKenzie, a professor of special education at the University of Kentucky, is a co-author on the work. The two are scheduled to present their findings at the Learning Disabilities Association of America convention this week.

### Lack of Policies

Fifty-eight percent of special education district leaders reported to Hudson and McKenzie that their school system had a policy or recommended practice on how long students could spend in a RTI model before being referred for a comprehensive evaluation or deemed to need special education. But the policies and practices varied widely. Districts reported that students spent on average 50 school days receiving interventions before the

next step in determining their eligibility for special education. One outlier district reported that students could spend 150 school days, or almost an entire school year, receiving interventions before further evaluation. Another district required only 10 school days.

Of 31 special education state directors who responded to a survey from the researchers, 29 said that the state had no policy or recommended practice to guide districts on how long students could receive interventions before being referred for a comprehensive evaluation.

The paper focusing on the responses from state special education officials was published in the March 2016 issue of *Contemporary School Psychology*. A second report, which included responses from district-level officials, was published in the December 2016 issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*.

Response-to-intervention models may differ in form among schools, but they contain some common features: universal screening tools that allow teachers to accurately determine which students need extra help; evidence-based interventions; multiple "tiers" of intervention intensity; and monitoring of progress, so that teachers have data on how well a student is responding to the extra help.

Intentionally missing from that process: a need for an official special edu-

### Pitfalls in Use of RTI Framework

A survey of state and district special education directors about how they were using response-to-intervention strategies to identify students with learning disabilities found that:

- More than 90 percent of states responding do not regulate or recommend the maximum number of days a student may spend in an RTI model before further evaluation for special education.
- State respondents said school districts are not required to report to them how long students are spending in an RTI framework before evaluation.
- Among districts that reported having their own policies or recommended practices on when special education referrals must be made, 40 percent said such referrals must wait until students have progressed through RTI's most intensive tier. Fifty percent said such referrals could happen at any time.
- Districts reported that students could spend a large amount of time in tiered-intervention models—the average was around 50 days, with one district reporting 150 school days.
- Forty-two percent of district respondents said they had neither a policy nor recommended practice for how long students could remain in an RTI instructional model before a special education referral. Sixty-three percent said they didn't allow schools to develop their own policies or practices, either.

SOURCES: Tina M. Hudson, assistant professor, East Tennessee State University; Robert G. McKenzie, professor, University of Kentucky



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	1	601	191
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ER, Pablo	1	485	167
IER, Rie		612	207
NWAY, Junko		533	180
OLEY, Sayuri			158
VIS, Reina		576	197
WSON, Lorenzo		575	193
UGHERTY, Nadine	1 Certified G	612	198
SON, Marco		598	188
S, Paloma		549	192
T, Arthur		529	161
Rebekah	2	583	193
a	1	558	196
	1	519	182
		548	17
		673	

## BENEFITS

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cation label before receiving services. That was seen as an improvement from other methods of identifying learning disabilities, such as giving students IQ tests to see if their intelligence was significantly different from their scores on achievement tests.

The “IQ achievement discrepancy” model was criticized by many as requiring students to fail for a long time before getting access to specialized services. One of the most influential criticisms came from the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, which was convened by President George W. Bush and released its findings in 2002.

### Adopting New Procedures

When the IDEA was reauthorized two years later, Congress adopted many of the commission’s recommendations, including permitting RTI as an evaluation method.

But observers warned of some potential problems during the public-comment period for regulations to support the new law. Without some sort of guidance from the Education Department, those commenters said, special education identification might take a long time and run afoul of the IDEA’s “child find” requirement that all children with disabilities be identified, located, and evaluated.

There also appears to be little way to judge if including RTI procedures as part

of an evaluation process is an improvement from other methods. Twenty-six of 30 special education directors who responded to the question (one director did not answer) said their states had no prescribed system for evaluating the effectiveness of RTI.

“[RTI] is being implemented, but not tracked in terms of the desired benefits it was supposed to achieve,” McKenzie said. “There is the potential to really delay identification without some degree of governance and oversight, even if it’s at the local level.”

### Federal Guidance

In the years since the IDEA was reauthorized, the Education Department has addressed some of the concerns. In guidance released in 2011, the department said that RTI strategies could not be used to delay or deny an initial evaluation for learning disabilities. It followed that up with similar guidance in 2016, singling out preschoolers referred to districts for evaluation.

The Every Student Succeeds Act does not include language about response to intervention specifically, but it does contain a brief mention of “multitiered systems of supports,” a term that encompasses RTI. The new law says multitiered systems can be used to help students with disabilities and English-language learners access challenging academic standards.

That RTI has led to potential unintended consequences for students with disabilities is not a surprise to attorneys who represent both school districts and parents of children with disabilities.

Allison Hertog, a Florida-based parent attorney and former special education teacher, said from her perspective, RTI is used as a “legally persuasive” way to avoid child find. “Some parents are told, ‘We don’t do comprehensive evaluations any more,’” she said.

Jose Martín, who works in Austin and has represented school districts in special education matters, said he’s warned districts about following such strict RTI processes that they might end up losing a legal battle. For example, in one unusual 2011 case that the school system ended up losing, an Ohio district tried to require a student with diabetes to go through RTI before receiving accommodations.

Keeping the process flexible means that districts should work in partnership with parents, Martín said. He said that districts also need to develop a set of general principles for practice.

“How much response is necessary to comfortably say a child is not [learning-disabled]? It’s completely unclear. I haven’t seen state policy that defines that in any meaningful way,” he said. “It’s crucial that [districts] adopt a guideline for what ‘response’ means that is defensible in court.” ■

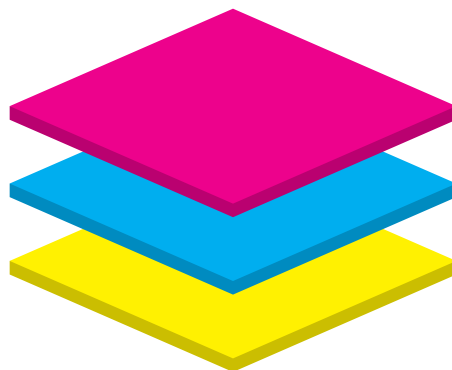
*Published December 14, 2016, in Education Week’s Special Report: Response to Intervention 2.0*

# What Are Multitiered Systems of Supports?

By Christina A. Samuels

**R**esponse to intervention, multitiered systems of supports, positive behavioral supports and interventions.

Proponents of an educational framework aimed at systematically supporting struggling students throw around those terms all the time, but what do they really mean? This glossary helps cut through the fog.



## What is response to intervention?

Response to intervention is an instructional framework that focuses on addressing problems early with students who show signs of academic weakness. Among its essential components: high-quality education for all students; universal screening so that teachers can spot children who are struggling; targeted, research-based “interventions” of increasing intensity designed to help students improve in problem areas; frequent progress monitoring so that teachers can see how well students are responding to the targeted interventions, and data-based decisionmaking based on the information gathered from that monitoring.

## Where did response to intervention come from?

The elements that make up what we call response to intervention have been around



for decades, but the term first showed up in federal law in 2004, when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was last reauthorized. In the special education law, the RTI process was put forward as an alternative method of identifying students with learning disabilities. Congress' intent was to make sure that students diagnosed with disabilities weren't just the victims of poor teaching.

Over the years, the educational framework has grown beyond the special education field. It is now seen as a method of improving instruction and academic results for all students.

### What are the "tiers" in RTI?

Response to intervention is generally conceptualized as different levels of instruction. Tier 1 is the strong instruction that every student in a school should be receiving. Tier 2 includes students who are receiving extra academic support, often provided in small groups. Tier 3 is for students who have severe or persistent needs who require individualized help.

RTI proponents have said that movement among those tiers should be fluid: A student with acute needs doesn't need to progress through the tiers to get individualized support, for example. And a student who needs some extra support should not miss out on the general instruction that is provided on Tier 1.

### What are positive behavioral interventions and supports?

PBIS predates RTI in its inclusion in federal law; it was first introduced in the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA as a research-based framework for supporting children with behavior disorders. As with RTI, PBIS operates on tiers. All students are taught certain behavioral expectations and rewarded for following them, and students with more needs are provided increasingly intensive interventions.

### What are multitiered systems of supports?

Districts differ in how they use this term. Some use RTI and MTSS as synonyms, for example. But usually, "multitiered systems of supports" is used as an umbrella term that encompasses both response to intervention and positive behavioral interventions and supports. Schools implementing MTSS are usually trying to tackle both behavioral and academic concerns at the same time, recognizing that they often go hand in hand: A student who can't understand what's going on in the classroom is more likely to act out, and a student who is grappling with behavior problems is not going to be able to focus on academics.

### How are schools using RTI and PBIS?

School districts have largely adopted the multitiered framework as a school-wide improvement process because of its focus on screening all children, improving overall instruction, and making decisions based on data. RTI has a stronger research base for early reading, however. District leaders say that setting up a multitiered framework for older children and in different subject areas has been more challenging because there are fewer research-based interventions in those areas and because it becomes more challenging with older students to create time for interventions during the school day.

### What does the Every Student Succeeds Act say about MTSS?

The text of the law mentions multitiered systems of supports only briefly, in the context of helping students with disabilities and English-language learners access challenging academic standards. State leaders may choose to use multitiered frameworks as a way to organize school improvement efforts in the improvement plans they must submit to the U.S. Department of Education next year. ■

*Sources: RTI Action Network; Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*

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## MTSS: Where the Obstacles Are

By Sarah D. Sparks

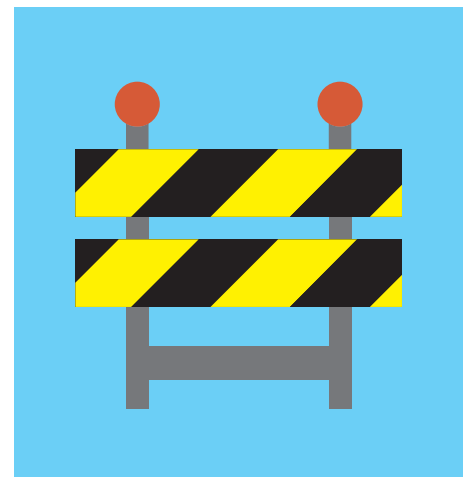
**A** multitiered system of supports for students is a model with a lot of moving parts and cooperation needed at every level, from the classroom to the state education agency. As a study of Michigan's statewide MTSS initiative found, "initial implementation is fragile, and sustained support must be provided to expect sustained implementation."

Problems can arise at any level of the system, from the core instruction for all students at Tier 1, to Tier 2 interventions for students falling behind, to the

intensive services provided for students at Tier 3. Here's how Ingham Intermediate school district—a regional agency serving 12 local districts and 10 charter schools—broke out the costs and common challenges at every phase of its multitiered system of supports model for academic and behavioral improvement.

### Shared Leadership

**What it is:** Building consensus among critical leaders and staff members and setting up infrastructure to begin a multitiered system of supports in a new school.



**Annual cost per student:** \$1.59 for the first three years; no ongoing cost.

**Challenges:** Ingham won early buy-in from school and district leaders for its multitiered-supports initiative in 2009 with \$11 million in start-up funding from the federal stimulus package. But principal and superintendent turnover has led to uneven support from school to school and district to district. Districts have suspended implementation for a few years at a time when leaders were not interested or did not understand the model.

### Universal Screening

**What it is:** Assessing all students' academic and behavioral status, both initially and at regular times during the school year. This includes literacy and math screening for all students in K-8 and for 9-12 students previously identified as at risk of falling behind academically, as well as behavior evaluations for all K-12 students.

**Annual cost per student:** \$7.50 for the first three years; \$7.75 ongoing.

**Challenges:** Setup includes both the buying the tests themselves and training teachers and staff to use them, and in Ingham, training and winning buy-in from staff was the bigger hurdle. "Screening was a battle in the beginning," said Laura Colligan, Ingham's supervisor for student instructional services. "People were worried we would be tracking kids. You always heard one horror story of [someone who heard] some child was put in a special [education] program based on" one assessment screener.

### Progress Monitoring

**What it is:** Using formative assessments, observations, and other data to track students' progress and gauge whether a particular intervention is helping them.

**Annual cost per student:** \$5.50 for the first three years; 55 cents ongoing.

**Challenges:** "We had to look at how we used our personnel resources," said Lisa Francisco, the principal of Alaiedon Elementary School in the Mason, Mich., school district (part of Ingham). "We use paraprofessionals a lot more instructionally than they were before, in progress monitoring. They needed training. We brought them into planning. ... They are very stressed right now, but they are far more valuable there."

Monitoring individual students has also led to tough conversations about

teachers' expectations for particular groups of students. "Sometimes, there were kids who were not put in Tier 3," as teachers requested, "because the teachers had not shown that they were really accessing the [Tier 1] core curriculum," said Pamela Westfall, an interventionist at Elliott Elementary School, part of the Holt public school system.



### Data-Based Decisionmaking and Problem-Solving

**What it is:** Collecting, analyzing, and summarizing students' data, alone or in a group, to answer questions and match students with appropriate instruction and interventions.

**Annual cost per student:** \$9.60 for the first three years; 96 cents ongoing.

**Challenges:** "One of our mistakes was just bringing together data on everything," said Helen McNamara, Ingham's assistant superintendent for budget and financing. "It was too much data; people got overwhelmed, and we never really had time to say what is the 'so what?' of this data. Now, [school] teams meet and talk about one or two things. You have math, reading, behavior: Just focus on your weakest area and start unpacking that."

### Research-Based Instruction, Intervention, and Practices

**What it is:** Using programs and practices—in core instruction and for interventions—that have reliable scientific evidence of being effective with the students who are using them.

**Annual cost per student:** The core curriculum cost \$100-\$120 for reading and \$85-\$100 for math. Interventions ranged considerably, from \$12 to \$710.

**Challenges:** Ingham got some push-back against uniform curricula: "Many of our districts had no core reading curriculum when we started, and only one had a research-based one," McNamara said. "Now, 11 out of 12 do."

Ingham also constantly works to provide a big enough pool of evidence-based interventions for every subject and grade level, with high school interventions particularly scarce.

### Student and Family Involvement

**What it is:** Providing online and in-person training for parents to understand the multitiered system and to support and monitor their students' progress at home.

**Annual cost per student:** \$3.63 for the first three years; no ongoing costs.

**Challenges:** "You have to make sure you have a lot of consensus, but we didn't get a lot of training on how you build that consensus," Francisco said. "How do you hear the voices of the naysayers, help them know they've been heard and yet that we are still moving forward?" ■

## COMMENTARY

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# Student Trauma Is Real. But Connection Can Heal.

By Gary G. Abud, Jr.

**C**an...can you...can you hear me now?

As humans, we are hard-wired for connection with each other. When we face challenging life situations, we often seek out and lean on others. Relationships are our human cell phone signals. In *The Power of the Other*, Dr. Henry Cloud compares our strong desire to develop meaningful relationships to how a cell phone constantly seeks connection in order to function.

Like a phone after powering up, people begin to seek connection as soon as they enter the world, and they never stop.

There are many factors that can interfere with connectivity; and if our signal gets disrupted, we relocate until a good connection can be restored. When we establish a strong connection with others, we want to maintain it, but we don't always have a 4G LTE network of relationships. Just as dead zones can disrupt cell signals, there are myriad factors, including trauma, that can disrupt our personal connections with others and limit our functioning.

## The Reality of Trauma

Traumatic events, such as war, death, or violence can have a serious influence on one's health, stress, and anxiety; for kids, this is especially true, as they lack the social and emotional skills to deal with the impact of trauma. Trauma can even cause physical pain, including when a traumatic event is non-physical. In recent years, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has helped to expand what qualifies as trauma to include more social and emotional events, such as poverty, divorce, and food insecurity.

When kids are exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) like abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction earlier in life, there is a larger risk for negative impacts on learning, health, and wellbeing in later years. That is be-

cause both emotional and social pain as well as physical pain are neurological.

Pain is more than a metaphor, as UCLA Neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman found in his research. Social separation in infants causes pain and triggers a physical response. Acetaminophen has been shown to alleviate the pain of a broken heart just like it can ameliorate back pain. Years after a traumatic event, one is more likely to remember the pain associated with a lost loved one than the pain of a broken arm. And, like Cloud, Lieberman also acknowledges that connection with others is among our greatest human needs.

## Trauma, ACEs, Empathy, and Learning

ACEs have more than an emotional impact on children, they change the brain, affecting memory, cognition, and learning capacity. Some children born during the Great Recession have been found to have deficiencies in nutrients that are key to cognitive development and mental health—such as folate, choline, and omega-3 fatty acids—as a result of poverty,

food insecurity, and parents' inability to purchase costlier whole foods. Stanford psychologist Hilit Kletter points out that this might lead kids to act out, exhibit big emotions, or struggle with impulsivity in school, which gets them in trouble or is mistaken for ADHD.

For many who experienced financial struggles and other ACEs in the past decade, there was a high level of shame. The shame associated with social and emotional pain breaks down connection with others and isolates us from each other. Brene Brown's model of interpersonal connection spans a continuum, ranging from empathy (most connected) to shame (least connected). According to her shame-resilience curriculum, vulnerability is the key to helping us connect, which in turn yields empathy, and can overcome the destructive impact of shame. So understanding and empathy from a caring adult can help contextualize symptoms of trauma as maladaptive behaviors, not misconduct.

In order for students to be receptive to new learning, there needs to be a supportive ecosystem around social and emotional development in schools, which includes awareness among educators, a trauma-informed MTSS, and a school-wide social emotional learning curriculum taught by teachers, like the Second Step Program. Researcher Chuck Saufier explains that this type of network of structure and support to kids, founded on authentic, trusting connections, changes the brain in a positive way. It decreases the stress response in the body, removing



cognitive inhibitors, and creates a climate of relaxed alertness in the brain, leading to better learning.

Students who have strong connections in school perform better, because relationships are central to learning and development, since they create a sense of doing school with, rather than doing school to, kids. That's why forming strong connections with students between educators and the classroom environment, is crucial. This yields relational literacy among students, too, and it all begins with adults who develop understanding and empathy for the students in the context of trauma.

### Connection Is the First Step

During a time when many students have experienced some form of trauma, even a single nurturing personal connection can work to reverse the negative aspects of trauma for a child. According to a recent report by the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, this is because that personal connection engenders in students a sense of belonging at school, especially students in poverty. Moreover, the report notes that teachers play a key role in fostering social and emotional competencies and skills in students through strong positive relationships.

*In Poor Students, Rich Teaching*, Eric Jensen describes the belief of teachers in their own ability to bring about powerful change in the classroom and overcome the impact of poverty on students as the "Relational Mindset." He cites that relationships, in particular for students from unstable homes, influence classroom engagement, allow low-income students to perform equal to higher-income peers, and can help build resilience to protect students from the effects of early-life trauma.

A Relational Mindset requires teachers to adopt a more psychological perspective on student behavior, says Jensen, but that mindset shift can start with changing our words and beliefs, according to the Continuum Group. Our personal beliefs and values inform our thoughts, words, and actions. So to adopt a belief that behavior skills (including social-emotional ones) are as important to academic success as reading and math, we should adjust our language around student behavior from an "I can't believe the student did this!" view to "why did the student do this?"

This will lead us to build relationships, maintain them, and work to repair them when connections are disrupted, eventually a relational mindset will help students develop relational lit-

eracy themselves. And this would have an impact on how we build our Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) systems to not only help some students, but to support all students. To make sure every kid succeeds, RTI expert Mike Mattos says we must treat behavior like we do reading and math. Just as we don't punish kids for struggling to read—and instead give them the targeted reading support they deserve—we should not just punish students for struggling with social, emotional, or behavioral skills. From a trauma-informed perspective, we should realize kids need interventions, coaching, and support to develop social-emotional skills, not punitive measures.

Because teachers play an important role in students' social-emotional skill development through relationships, one way they can work to enhance those connections in the classroom is by building on the ways children learn from each other in a social context. Teachers can make sure there are ample opportunities for student-to-student discussion, collaboration, and feedback in the learning environment within students zones of proximal development. Better communication will yield stronger relationships and better connections, working to undo the harmful effects of trauma.

### Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices are flexible and responsive approaches to establishing, developing, and restoring relationships that enable people to develop a shared sense of community in an increasingly disconnected world. Restorative Practices empower students to resolve conflicts on their own and in small groups, and it's a growing approach around the country to building community and addressing student behavior issues in schools.

One way to better test scores and less discipline problems in schools is to adopt restorative practices. And what educators wouldn't want that, especially when approximately 5% of students represent 50% of all disruptive behaviors in schools? In classrooms or schools, the intent is to first make relationships with students, then maintain them, and (when things go wrong) repair the harm to those relationships. This happens through one-on-one, small, and large group interactions, bringing students together with adults to dialogue and discuss issues or questions with one another.

Restorative Practices have three main goals:

- **Developing competency** to increase the pro-social skills of students, help them realize when they have harmed others, and address underlying factors that lead youth to engage in maladaptive behaviors.
- **Ensuring safety** by directing students to recognize the need to keep the school community safe through strategies that build relationships and empower them to take responsibility for the well-being of one another.
- **Sharing accountability** through providing opportunities for wrongdoers to be accountable to those they have harmed, and enabling them to repair the harm they caused to the extent possible, not just serving a punishment for the offense, which often leaves the victim out of it.

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), a fundamental tenet of the Restorative Practices philosophy for schools is that students are happier, more cooperative, and more successful when educators do things with them, rather than to them or for them. Restorative Practices revolves around safety of all, meeting the needs of each individual, and focusing on the harm done to others through words and actions.

Brain research on stress, motivation, learning, and memory supports the use of restorative practices in schools. These practices have the aim of fostering strong connections between students and others in schools, and then using that as the basis for addressing issues that come up in the school setting. It is not a single strategy, set of talk moves, or group of activities; it is a philosophy of interpersonal connection between students and adults in schools that can support social-emotional development in students and learning in schools.

Implementing Restorative Practices at your school requires training and coaching of staff and students, progress monitoring of the practices themselves and student interactions, and debriefing about the implementation process along the way. But because Restorative Practices emphasize the values of empathy, respect, honesty, acceptance, responsibility, and accountability, it is especially promising as a schoolwide means of supporting students social-emotional learning in a trauma-informed way.



It provides ways to effectively address behavior and other school issues, offers a supportive environment that can improve learning, and ensures student wellbeing by allowing for the reparation of harm. Restorative Practices are not about enforcing rules; the focus is on repairing harm done to others, fulfilling a need not met, and ensuring the safety of all. They can be incorporated into MTSS or a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system.

At their core, Restorative Practices require the formation of strong connections and the building of relationships. From there, harm to relationships can be repaired and connection can be restored. Because of our strong desire to connect with others, as people we do not typically want to harm those with whom we have a relationship.

Changes of behavior do not come from a punishment anyway, they come from a change of heart. That happens when three factors are present in addressing behavior: the impact of one's actions on others are made known, the possibilities of alternate actions are shown, and the opportunity to repair the harm done is given. After all, you cannot restore a relationship with, or repair harm to, someone with whom you have no relationship in the first place.

And in a school, with kids and adults who are longing to connect with others against a backdrop of trauma, our hearts' desire should not be for punishment, it should be for the connective power of empathy, teaching, and forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't excuse behavior; forgiveness prevents behavior from stepping on your heart.

Through the healing power of connection, and by installing restorative practices at a school or in a classroom, educators have the potential to positively influence school climate and strengthen social connections between students and staff. Restorative Practices can enhance the climate of a classroom and school much better than extrinsic rewards or threats of punishment ever could, because they empower students.

This philosophy and pedagogy meets the vital need to help students develop social-emotional skills, support interpersonal relationships, and be non-confrontational with even the most challenging students. In the end, Restorative Practices prioritize relationship building and mutual understanding over finger-pointing and retribution. With the primary 'rule' being "do no harm," Restorative Practices becomes a

tool to fight against the negative impact of poverty and the harmful effects of trauma. Through the power of connection, it teaches students how to become the people we want them to be, and does not just expect them to do so on their own.

### Seven Ways to Make & Maintain Connections

For any educator to connect with their students is a given, but it isn't always easy to do, especially once the school year gets busy. But because it is so crucially important to build connections with kids, even those not in your classroom, the work must be made a priority.

Here are seven activities that can be used with students or adults in the classroom or school setting. These can help to make connections, but also maintain them as well. This is especially important for the use of Restorative Practices later on to repair relationships. But it should not just be about the connections with kids. Remember that building connection and community with the adults in the building is key too, as it will set the tone for doing the same with students. Many of these activities are great ways to get the school year started, too:

- 1. Daily Check-Ins & Check-Outs**—each staff member drafts a set of students with whom they make sure to briefly check in and out each day
- 2. Community Building Circles**—using Restorative Practices circle format to get to know one another in the classroom, discuss topics, and have shared experiences
- 3. Team Building Activities**—Team-edia has a variety of easy and quick team-building activities for both small and large groups
- 4. One and Done**—in the first 30 days of the school year, demonstrate a single act of empathy (e.g., doing a favor) for a different student each day
- 5. Two by Ten**—Identify one or two students who need a connection early on in the year. For 10 consecutive days, invest two minutes each day with them to talk about anything but school

**6. Three in Thirty**—Ask enough questions to discover three things about every student in the first 30 days of the year

**7. Me Bag**—Have each student, and teacher, fill a bag with two to three items that represent who you are, and then provide an opportunity to share what everyone packed in their bag with each other

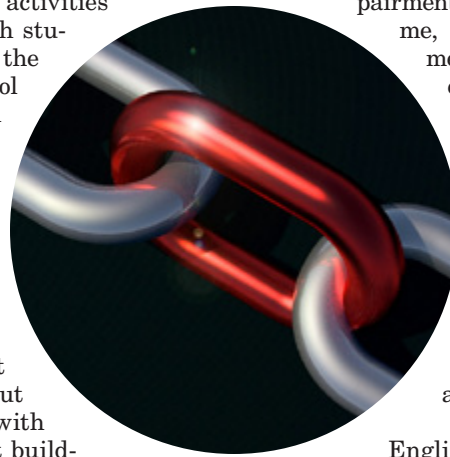
### A Personal Connection

My favorite class in high school, also taught by my favorite teacher, was AP English. Despite struggling as a reader throughout school, due to a visual impairment, I loved literature. For me, reading was a private means to a very public end. I looked forward to what came as a result of reading: the opportunity to dialogue about a text with others in class. Even when I found reading to be tiresome or difficult, I persisted, because I loved discussing literature, especially poetry.

Nearly 400 years ago, English poet John Donne famously declared, "no man is an island." Like Cloud referred to cell phones, Donne was speaking of connection in the island metaphor. To this day, I can vividly recall discussing Donne's poem in 11th grade. Because of the social context of the class, AP English developed in me a sense of belonging, a growth mindset, and the grit necessary to succeed against the setback of having a degenerative eye disease.

Now, I realize that my affinity toward English class likely had less to do with the literary content and more to do with the personal connection I felt in the classroom. ■

*Gary G. Abud, Jr. is an educational consultant, speaker, and writer. Previously, he served as an elementary school principal, taught high school science and technology, and worked as an instructional coach for PreK-12 schools. In 2014, he was selected as the Michigan Teacher of the Year and consults with educators, schools, and organizations on topics of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and technology. He resides near Detroit, Mich. with his wife and fellow educator Janice, and their preschool daughter Laina. Connect with Gary on Twitter @mr\_abud.*



# A THREE-PRONGED FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL MTSS

By: ABRAM JIMENEZ, ED.D.



At SFUSD, the central office developed a three-pronged framework that outlined different types of supports and where and how they would be implemented. The framework included the following categories:

## *1. SITE-BASED INTERVENTION SERVICES*

These supports involve sending dedicated staff members directly to the schools, to address issues of crisis or trauma, build the efficacy of grade-level teams through effective collaboration and the use of data, and increase access to instructional coaching for teachers. (See Figure 8.) These supplemental resources—managed and funded by the central office—are prioritized for, and concentrated in, Tier 3 and Tier 2 schools.

## *2. SYSTEM REORGANIZATION*

Qualitative data, based on Bryk's Five Essential Supports, informs reorganization at the site and central office levels, in order to make supports more efficient and effective. For instance, rather than

having literacy coaches work in isolation, a professional learning community (PLC) was formed to facilitate the collaborative development of consistent instruction delivery models and common tools to measure success across schools.

Bryk's research also indicates that resources must be aligned and coordinated in a coherent manner for maximum impact. So Instructional and Student Support Leadership Team Networks were established, to build content knowledge, hone adult development skills, and reflect on implementation successes and dilemmas. This networked learning concept applies to and lives within each support position, including Instructional Reform Facilitators, Family Liaisons, and Nurses, and provides administrators with the opportunity to:

- Meet regularly with a designated small group or network of school principals

under the direction of an Assistant Superintendent or Director of Principal Supervision.

- Develop their leadership practice via identified PLCs, instructional leadership networks, and/or training/participation in formal classroom walkthroughs.
- Participate in professional development that will provide a deeper working knowledge in key district priority areas led by central office leaders.

### 3. *FOCUSED SUPPORTS*

Tier 3 schools, which need the most help, receive site-based intervention services internally, as well as supports from external, grant-funded sources.





DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORTS

**SITE-BASED INTERVENTION SERVICES**

*LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS*

- Coaching and support from central office
- Development of strategic improvement networks to provide additional attention to schools in need
- Facilitated Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) Networks to build alignment and effectiveness among ILT members

*INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS*

- Funding, deploying, networking and supporting site-based Literacy Coaches, Data, and RtI Facilitators
- Implementing Learning Labs for various schools based on the performance spectrum
- Leveraging grant funding to provide materials and supports for digital literacy

*PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY SUPPORTS*

- Funding, deploying, networking and supporting site-based Literacy Coaches, Data, and RtI Facilitators
- Implementing Learning Labs for various schools based on the performance spectrum
- Leveraging grant funding to provide materials and supports for digital literacy

*STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING CLIMATE SUPPORTS*

- Student Behavioral Teams to support the development of preventative practices and support crisis response
- Funding, deploying, networking and supporting physical and mental health supports reflective of specific student needs (e.g., high # IEP, 504 plans)
- Contracts for additional mental health services from agencies at impacted sites

*PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNITY SUPPORTS*

- Community Schools Incubator
- Family Engagement Specialists hired to support site-based family liaisons
- Aligning partner matches with school programmatic interests and needs

*FINANCIAL SUPPORTS*

- State and Federal Grants
- Per Pupil funding
- Weighted Student Formula weights for English Learners, Students with Disabilities and Low-Income Youth

Figure 8. Research-based supports, which have demonstrated impact on schools, are delivered on-site where needed.

## COMMENTARY

Published March 17, 2016, in Education Week's Finding Common Ground Blog

# Do Teachers Need Response to Intervention?

By Daisy Dyer Duerr

**R**esponse to Intervention (RTI) is something we talk about quite a bit in education. In fact, there are few successful schools you can enter today that don't have far-reaching RTI systems of support for their students. When students struggle, they may need something extra to help them along, and other students need an intervention that may be a little more in depth.

As a former school principal, I understand the benefits of RTI. Having been the Principal of a failing school where successful RTI implementation was instrumental in changing school culture and improving student learning outcomes, I can speak firsthand to the powerful impact of RTI practices.

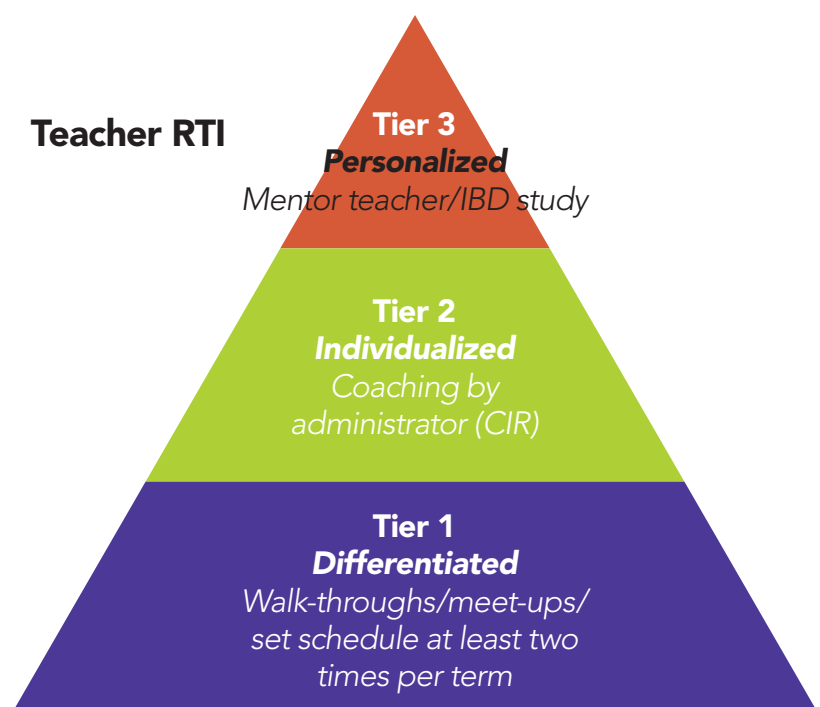
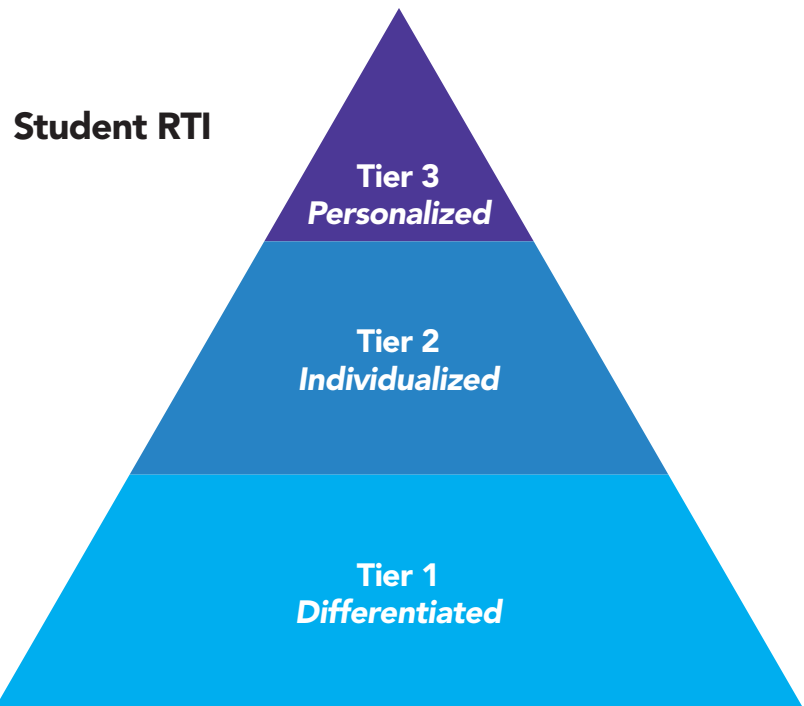
*But first...the basics.*

Chris Weber and Tom Hierck, authors of "The RTI Roadmap for School Leaders" & "RTI is a Verb" say the following about RTI: Tier 1 is Differentiated, Tier 2 is Individualized, and Tier 3 is Personalized.

- Some students will require differentiation and scaffolds to optimally succeed and grow in Tier 1.
- Some students will need more time and alternative supports at the completion of units of instruction, as revealed by evidence, to master core priorities AND others will be ready for greater levels of complexity and will greatly benefit from opportunities to delve into priorities at greater levels of depth - Tier 2.
- Some students will be in desperate need of immediate, intensive, and targeted supports to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills AND other students will benefit from opportunities for students to dive deep into a passion - highly specialized supports to meet students' at, and nudge them from, their zones of proximal development - Tier 3.

## What About RTI for Teachers?

Keeping those general principles in place as defined by Weber & Hierck let's think about how to create a Pyramid of Interventions for Response to Intervention.



tion for Educators. What might a non-evaluative systematic process of supports for educators accomplish. We already have models to follow; highly developed systems working for our students in our most successful schools; why wouldn't we use these same, proven principles and constructs for our educators?

RTI for students can be beneficial, in fact, I'd contend it's transformational when done properly at all levels; this I know from my experience as a Principal. As I work as a consultant I apply this experience...only I'm working with teachers instead of their students.

For example, this January I began working with a large district's secondary principals and assistant principals. My job has been coaching them on how to use the International Center for Leadership in Education's (ICLE) Collaborative Instructional Review.

ICLE's Collaborative Instructional Review is a process that involves the administrator collaborating with the teacher on lesson plans; following rubrics established for:

- 1. Rigor:** This Rubric supports educators in building effective instruction based on indicators of rigorous instruction from three areas: thoughtful work, high-level questioning, and academic discussion.
- 2. Relevance:** This Rubric supports educators in building effective instruction based on indicators of relevant instruction from three areas: meaningful work, authentic resources, and learning connections.
- 3. Learner Engagement:** This Rubric supports educators in creating & implementing an effective learner environment that is engaging & aligned to learner needs based on these three indicators: active participation, learning environment, and formative processes and tools.

The administrator observes the lesson the two co-constructed together, takes copious notes while observing, then after some time to calibrate, they debrief together. Besides the co-construction of the lesson the other integral part is that the leader is observing student learning more than they are observing the teacher teaching.

After all, if the students don't understand the lesson, why teach it in the first place?

During the debriefing there is discussion of what went well, what didn't go well and why? They also discuss how the les-

son could be improved in the future (if it could be) and what the teacher will do moving forward.

The outcome is NOT an evaluation, nor a "one and done" interaction, but the beginning of an ongoing series of collaborations and open dialogue between the administrator and the teacher to improve instructional outcomes. This clearly takes a great deal of relational trust.

While involved in this practice both the administrator and the teacher are engaged in best practices for student learning and have a vested interest in successful outcomes.

It's my assertion: Highly Developed RTI Systems for Educators will result in higher quality Tier 1 Interventions; causing the need for Tier 2 & Tier 3 interventions for students to decrease.

### How Do Leaders Provide RTI for Teachers?

Today's teacher/educator evaluation systems don't provide for improvement/instructional help for educators...in fact many are still reliant on a "check the box system." In the check the box system, feedback is rarely provided to teachers, so the evaluation becomes a waste of time (for more on that read Peter's blog about observations).

Observations should be based on cycles that include deeper conversations, and trusting relationships built between educators that result in improvement in instruction and student learning outcomes. It should not be a piece of paper or something you get on your inbox describing your lesson in "check box" terms.

One of the ways to have observations with more impact is for administrators to take on the instructional coaching philosophy in their school. In order for school leaders to provide RTI to their teachers, they need to work in partnership (Knight) with their teachers on a co-constructed goal.

One of the suggestions from a colleague on Voxer was that leaders intentionally schedule their week so they had a full day a week of instructional coaching. Leaders can observe and have partnership conversations with their teachers. However, as enthusiastic as the tone of the conversation began, the ever daunting task is how to approach coaching as

a school building leader. The job of being a leader can definitely prevent leaders from taking on their version of an instructional coaching role...and that's where we go back to lackluster evaluation processes.

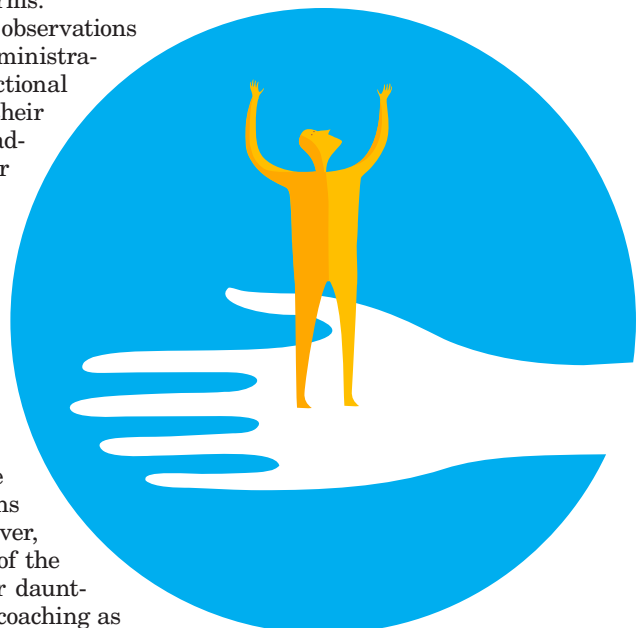
I do believe there is a happy medium. I have never worked in a district where my duties as Principal would have allowed for me to spend an entire day doing instructional coaching during the week, but I have done ½ days of instructional coaching often. I believe it's a matter of being intentional with our time as Principals. There was a consensus in the Vox that principals must be instructional leaders.

I don't believe this is possible if you don't model and "do the work" in the classrooms with your teachers. We must find "our way" of making this happen.

### Proficiency and Beyond!

We ask for proficiency and beyond from our students; yet we provide their instructors with little to no supports to get them there. Educators need a culture where RTI/Coaching/Interventions is the norm for them; just like our students. Professional development at the beginning of the year is not enough. We need timely, systematic, supports available on a continuum. This is how we will meet the needs of more students at Tier 1. It's time...we make time. ■

*Daisy Dyer Duerr is a former school principal who is now a national speaker and consultant.*





## COMMENTARY

Published January 5, 2016, in *Education Week*

# Four Steps to Implement RTI Correctly

By Amanda VanDerHeyden,  
Matthew Burns, Rachel Brown,  
Mark R. Shinn, Stevan Kukic,  
Kim Gibbons,  
George Batsche,  
& W. David Tilly

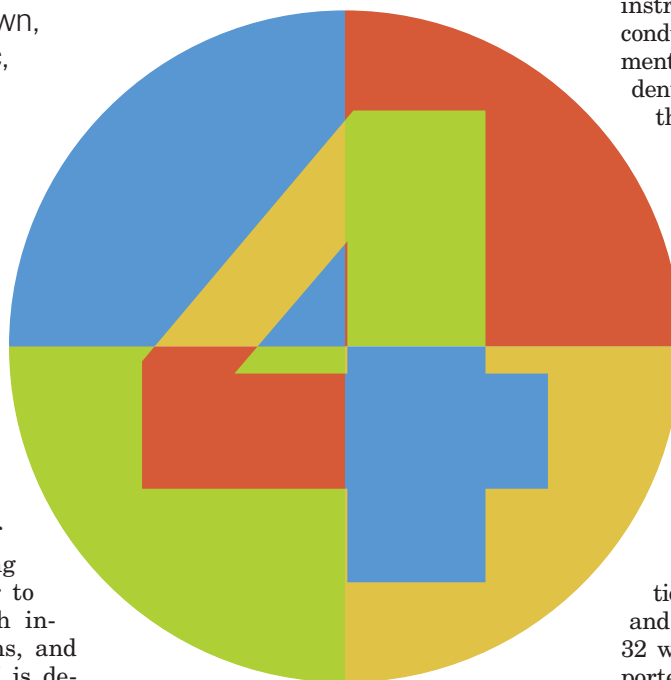
With the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the national education agenda shifted from a focus on process and access to a focus on results. In this new education climate, Response to Intervention, or RTI, spread like the latest diet fad because it offered schools a way to get better results for students.

RTI refers to a collection of practices that involve identifying academic risk, intervening prior to full-blown academic failure with increasingly intensive interventions, and monitoring student growth. RTI is designed to remove the oh-so-human temptation to speculate and slowly mull over learning problems, and instead spur teachers into action to improve learning, see if the actions worked, and make adjustments in a continuous loop.

Guided by assessment data, children progress through a series of instructional tiers experiencing increasingly intensive instruction as needed. We—a group of education leaders and researchers—have heard it said, “Being against RTI is like being against motherhood.” After all, who does not want children to grow?

However, knowing what works and doing what works are two different endeavors. It is difficult for people to successfully follow diets, stick to budgets, and, yes, to implement RTI. The key challenge, we believe, is getting the already-busy people in schools to implement RTI like an effective weight-loss plan, with a commitment to attaining long-term improvements for all students.

What are the actions that count in RTI? Here are four common implementation



pearls for schools that want to attain better results with RTI:

**First, it is time for smarter screening.** Schools are in an overtesting reality. Time spent on assessments is costly both in resources and lost instructional time. We routinely work with school systems that allocate 25 percent or more of their time to assessment. Because most schools are not clear about how they will use the assessment information—or what their actual decisionmaking needs are, for that matter—schools often hedge their bets and opt to collect more data. Most administrators have heard how powerful assessment can be, so they feel confident that more assessment is not harmful, even if it does not seem incredibly helpful. This type of blind screening does more harm than good.

Year-end test scores can be used to indicate program health, and one or two single universal screenings can be used

to reflect midstream performance. Use of planned instructional trials between assessment occasions, or “gated screening,” improves the accuracy and efficiency of screening decisions to pinpoint the small group of students who really need stepped-up interventions—Tier 2 or Tier 3, in RTI parlance—when core instruction is working well.

In jargon-free terms, schools should administer only one low-cost screening tool to rule out or address a systemic, core-instruction problem first. They should conduct a series of brief follow-up assessments, with only the small group of students who appear to be at risk on either the first screening or the year-end test from the preceding year. Schools can minimize screening costs by selecting efficient measures and administering them well.

These assessments, however, cannot be allowed to interfere with teaching. Assessments are powerful, but there is a point of diminishing returns. We believe that most schools are in this zone of diminished returns because they are not assessing strategically.

**Second, the focus of effective RTI implementation must be core instruction.** Core instruction is where the teacher, student, and content meet every day for roughly 32 weeks. Every teacher should be supported to know exactly what students are expected to learn within their grade level, to map a calendar of instruction onto that timeline using resources beyond the textbook, and to assess student mastery of skills.

When core instruction is strong, a majority of students perform in the “not-at-risk” range on screening. When there is a systemwide problem, it is foolish to try to provide interventions to all of those children as a first step in RTI. When many children score in the “risk” range on a screening, it is not possible to figure out who truly needs help. As a result, a teacher will likely end up providing intervention to the wrong students, if he or she works only with a select group.

The process of trying to provide intervention to more than 20 percent of students rapidly overwhelms the system’s resources. When large numbers of children are at risk, the first step should be core-instruction improvements and effectively delivered classwide intervention.

Classwide intervention is a high-yield

and easy-to-deploy intervention tactic that, while not new, is not as widely used as it could be. One experimental study found that for every seven children who received classwide mathematics intervention, one child was prevented from failing the year-end state test in mathematics. Improvements to core instruction require serious teamwork, trust, and a paradigm shift in schools in which teachers may be accustomed to working in isolation. These teachers may even fear a loss of autonomy or vulnerability in doing the work required to upgrade their core-instructional program.

**Third, schools need effective intervention systems that match student need.** Many schools struggle to implement effective supplemental interventions. At the surface level, targeting reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness for the weakest students sounds great. But intervening without consideration for what a student specifically needs is like choosing an antibiotic without identifying the bacteria causing an infection.

For some children, the intervention will appear to work because they would have done fine without intervention. For some children, the intervention will work because it happened by chance to be a good match. And for others, the intervention just won't work.

In most schools, Tier 2 or 3 intervention is a prescription that lasts about 20 weeks, in which all students get the same thing, whether they need it or not. It is time to align Tier 2 and Tier 3 practices with student learning needs and require adults to be more responsive to whether these tactics actually improve learning.

**Fourth, intervention intensity is not the same as “longer and louder.”** The ways in which RTI has tried to operationalize intervention intensity are out of sync with the best available evidence on what makes for more intensive instruction. Schools can improve implementation by considering research evidence to select instructional actions that produce strong returns on student learning. Such tools include aligning intervention strategy with student proficiency, increasing the number of learning trials within an intervention session, providing more frequent and precise feedback to students, and adjusting intervention tactics between sessions based on student growth (or lack thereof).

Research has shown that RTI practices can work to improve student outcomes. Yet, the most pernicious threat to RTI—

and the Achilles' heel of all promising practices in education—is poor implementation. Implementers can work smarter by investing in core-instructional support with renewed vigor, implementing classwide intervention supplements, paring down screening while using the data more effectively, and changing the way they operationalize intensity.

If the number of students attaining proficiency does not grow across screenings and years, then RTI is not working for your school and should be adjusted. Knowing how to adjust is pretty clear, but getting people to do the work with you is the hard part. ■

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