

About This Book

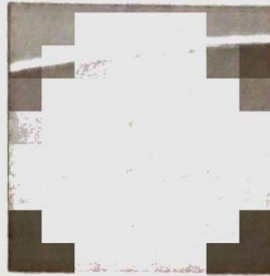
The Essential Guide to RTI

An Integrated, Evidence-Based Approach

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Core Principles and Practice of RTI

What is response to intervention (RTI)? How can this process be succinctly defined, so that once grasped, it can be effectively implemented? It is difficult to put RTI in a “box” and define it as a specific entity or process. The National Center on RTI uses the following definition:

Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities.¹

This definition of RTI emphasizes the integration of assessment and intervention with a multilevel prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavior problems.² The framework of RTI, at its core, is an instructional service delivery model founded on two key premises:

- 1. All children can learn when provided with appropriate, effective instruction.**
- 2. Most academic difficulties can be prevented with early identification of need followed by immediate intervention.**

In order to provide this appropriate, effective instruction, RTI must be built upon a multi-tiered framework of increasingly intensive and focused instruction and intervention for serving the needs of all students, including those with academic and behavioral concerns.³

Other definitions include:

A practice of providing high-quality research based instruction and intervention that is matched to student need. Student outcome data based on this instruction are gathered and monitored so that instructional adjustments can occur, or student goals can be adjusted.⁴

A systematic decision-making process designed to allow for early and effective responses to children's learning and behavioral difficulties, provide children with a level of instructional intensity matched to their level of need and then provide a data-based method for evaluation effectiveness of instructional approaches.⁵

RTI is a combination of effective instructional practices based on data that focus on the positive outcome of academic and behavioral achievement for all students. As one expert in the field put it, "In essence RTI is the license to do the right thing."⁶ The specific definitions and core components of these effective instructional practices are difficult to nail down, because they differ from building to building with student population and staffing differences. Unfortunately, it is impossible to say, "Follow these steps, and you'll have RTI." There is no recipe for RTI. Thus this entire book is dedicated to working through the possible options and scenarios for putting together an effective RTI framework with systems that align assessment, instruction, and intervention in order to prevent learning problems and maximize student achievement.

The Rationale

Before he or she can begin process steps, the implementer must clearly understand the rationale for the sweeping changes that encompass RTI implementation. Current federal laws have pushed the inequities in the educational system into the spotlight, revealing the inherent and urgent need to change our current systems. Why the urgent need? There are numerous factors, including the structures of public education in the twenty-first century and the implications of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001), the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 2002), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004).

Many different disconnected silos of educational programs and initiatives have characterized our education system. Each program had its own agenda, its own labels, its own purpose, and, most important, its own funding. Very few individuals within a program wanted to share any of their resources, and they may not have trusted others to do as good a job as they did with their own set of students, whose labels identified them as "mine." As Reynolds put it, "Our education system has grown up through a process of 'disjointed incrementalism.'"⁷ This process is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Each of these silos created its own set of rules about who could enter, who could exit, and what type of instruction the funding and program would support. Many times these programs would be controlled by nonsensical rules about program availability and

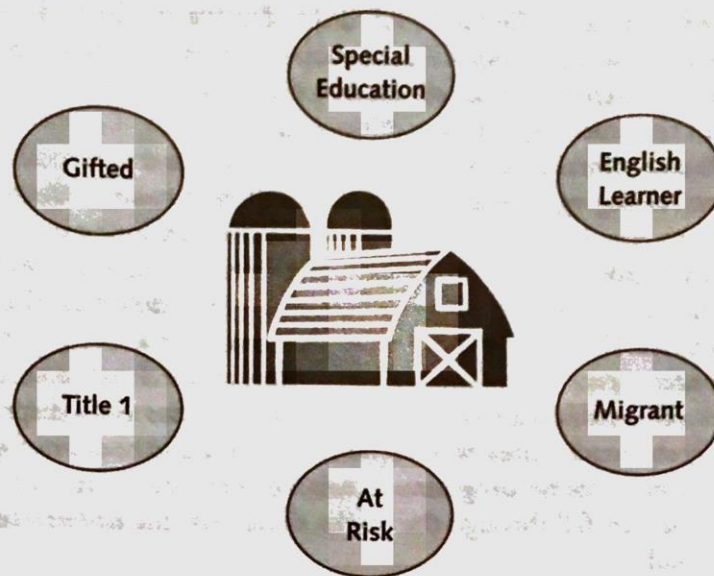


Figure 1.1 Disjointed Incrementalism

use. It seemed at times that the more students identified to fit into the criteria of that particular silo, the better, because then the funding would increase. This often created an incentive to identify students with specific labels, as the more identified, the greater would be the funding stream. Making sure that a child had a label had become profitable to schools and programs. In the United States today, although federal laws limit special education funding so that overidentification is not a financial incentive, many states continue to support such funding models. High numbers of special education students are often not due to disability clusters, but to a bureaucracy that allows the funding stream to course in such a way that the more students identified, the greater the funding. In addition to instructional dollars to support the labeled students, each silo needed funding to support the administration and implementation of often parallel programs.

The traditional silo of special education has had its share of problems, which have now come to light because of ESEA. The practice of segregation, which in the 1970s and 1980s was deemed the *only way* to provide “specially designed academic instruction” for students with disabilities, did not prove to demonstrate positive outcomes for the majority of children. The practice of remedial instruction in a segregated setting created a situation in which students received inequitable educations, all in the name of providing individualized and prescriptive instruction at “their levels.” In many states this remedial mode of instruction created an achievement gap that is glaring. It would seem from the data that special education with a focus on segregating students with disabilities in disability-alike groups did not prove effective. In research by Glass on the effectiveness of special education, the findings revealed that, generally, student scores in academic achievement and social skills decreased once students were placed in special education. He summarized his results with the following statement: “Special education placement showed no tangible benefits whatsoever for the pupils. Either someone thinks otherwise or special placements continue to be made for reasons other than to benefit pupils.”⁸ Keeping special education in its own silo did not pay off in educational achievement.

The unintended effects of such disjointed systems include the overidentification of students for these programs. As mentioned earlier, incentive funding creates a situation in which students with labels mean jobs, and in a struggling economy one cannot discount that such exploitation does exist.

The traditional systems of special education in the twentieth century have focused too much on segregation and labels, which allowed some students to receive substandard educations. The benefits of segregated special education have been questionable at best, with instructional services that have often been unrelated to grade-level standards. The “wait-to-fail” model left students with huge gaps that even the best special educators could not fix. The heavy reliance on special education as the only game in town that could help students receive any small-group or targeted instruction created the perfect storm for the overidentification of students with disabilities and a disproportionate number of minority students. Those who could not qualify and could not get a label were left out to dry. There were no programs or small-group interventions for this population, and one by one they fell through the cracks. Obviously the traditional system was in need of an overhaul.

Shifts in Thinking

ESEA has caused education to shift its focus from what is “yours” and what is “mine” to the academic achievement of *all* “our” students. Prior to the accountability driven by NCLB, states were not required to report student achievement at a federal level. Many states had their own accountability systems, but within these systems, scores for the disadvantaged, ethnically diverse, English learners, and students with disabilities were not disaggregated. The scores of the average-to-high achievers hid the poor outcomes of these groups. NCLB shone a fierce and unfriendly light on the outcomes of these subgroups. It was not too surprising that these subgroups were not faring very well—thus the major shifts in thinking.

The implementation of NCLB, as flawed as it may have been, led education to scrutinize its practices and realize that the archaic structures of the past thirty years needed a complete overhaul. How the needs of students were addressed needed to be changed. Thinking focused more on student learning. With academic achievement the bottom line for all schools and all student groups, the RTI framework across disciplines and grade levels remained congruent with NCLB by promoting the idea that schools have an obligation to ensure that all students participate in strong instructional programs that support multifaceted learning.⁹

Special education law supported the NCLB focus on improved academic achievement for students with disabilities. The current emphasis is on results based on scientifically based instruction in the core curriculum. This is a far cry from the segregated special education silos that had been common in the past three decades. Special education and general education law as well had gone their separate ways in the past, but now for the first time, they send a common message.

While general education and special education law have differed significantly in the past, the language of these two laws now shows common agreement with a focus on achievement and accountability for all students, as the following excerpts show:

From NCLB: “holding schools, local education agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement for *all* students” and “promoting school-wide reform and ensuring the access of all children to effective, scientifically-based instructional strategies” (emphasis added).¹⁰

From IDEA: “to improve the academic achievement and functional performance of children with disabilities including the use of scientifically based instructional practices, to the maximum extent possible.”¹¹

Together these two laws present a common message. ESEA emphasizes the academic achievement of all students, while IDEA focuses on improving academic achievement for students with disabilities. These commonalities are presented in Table 1.1.

These two laws work in tandem, describing the need for a cohesive instructional system that is geared toward meeting the needs of all learners, because all learners now are expected to achieve grade-level skills. This standards-aligned accountability has created a need for an educational framework that focuses on a system that offers an equitable opportunity for all students to achieve at high levels.

The Promise of RTI

RTI is the framework that allows students to achieve this goal. The targeted instruction and intervention guarantees that no one child or group of children is allowed to fall through the cracks. This will require momentous change, but it is a need long in coming, and RTI provides the promise to meet the need.

The promise that RTI brings all students is the assurance of early identification of learning and behavior problems through a strong focus on academic and behavioral results generated by targeted instruction that is driven by progress monitoring. All students are included in a single, schoolwide, standards-based accountability system. No different expectations for children of color, no lowered expectations for English learners, no substandard expectations for children with disabilities. The promise of RTI is that all student populations have the opportunity to receive an equitable education in a cohesive system that leads to the acquisition of skills necessary to be able to make postsecondary choices.

Table 1.1 Commonalities of ESEA and IDEA

ESEA (2002)	IDEA (2004)
Ensures <i>all</i> students achieve at high levels	Emphasizes results
Requires states to develop standards to define what students should know and do	Access to/Progress in the general education curriculum
Requires accountability through assessment for all students	Standards-based accountability
Requires <i>all</i> students to make adequate yearly progress	Educational benefit and procedural guarantees

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What RTI Is

Response to intervention was born of special education law, but only a part of the RTI process is about special education. Providing instruction that is scientifically research based as the part of a special education evaluation is only a very small part of the whole of RTI.

Prevention

The focus on ensuring high-quality, evidence-based instruction in the general education setting is the first line of defense for preventing later learning difficulties.¹² The impetus for research-based instruction and intervention came from the research of Reid Lyon and his colleagues that suggested that reading failure was due not to learning disabilities but to a lack of effective instruction.¹³ Much of the early work on RTI models focused on early reading interventions, and from these practices we've learned that effective prevention requires schoolwide screening of all students, especially incoming kindergarteners and all new students who come in during the school year. This screening process allowed teachers to focus and target instruction to the needs identified in this screening. Screening naturally led to targeted instruction that is aligned to the core curriculum or the grade-level standards. The student's progress on learning these standards and on the specific target skill is measured on a regular basis by ongoing progress monitoring.

For example, the schoolwide screening might identify eight first graders who could not segment words into phonemes. Without screening, the classroom teacher may not have noticed this skill weakness and would not be able to provide the targeted instruction needed to teach this skill. Now that screening has identified this weakness, the teacher provides the needed instruction in her classroom, and further reading failure due to this weakness has been prevented. This early instructional intervention occurred without the need for a child study team meeting, further diagnostic assessments by additional personnel, or a waiting-to-fail model of qualification in order to receive small-group instruction. The reading weakness was identified through screening and was targeted in small-group instruction in the core, and reading failure was prevented.

Intervention

Intervention is instruction that is applied to students whose progress is not commensurate with their peers.¹⁴ The intent of intervention is to close achievement and learning gaps as quickly as possible. Although prevention has been the primary focus at the elementary grades, intervention is recognized as drop-out prevention at the secondary level. Intervention might be taken in primary grades, where, for example, two of the eight first graders continue to struggle with phoneme segmentation. These two students may need further intervention, because the first round of instruction did not prove effective. These students do not need to be removed from the core, but they may need additional intervention time to practice the phoneme segmentations skills and close the gap that exists between themselves and their peers. The increase in instructional intensity or time characterizes the intervention part of RTI.

As mentioned, intervention can occur at any grade level, but many times intensive intervention does not begin until fourth grade or beyond. At this grade level, a greater focus on curricular and instructional change is needed to meet the needs of struggling readers. Some states have adopted intensive intervention programs that are considered “the core” for students who fall several grade levels below their peers. While this practice is controversial, because students are often removed from the language arts core class, when these curricular changes are used with fidelity students are able to move back into the core within a two-year period. For students in upper grades who have few reading skills, the trade-offs in learning to read in an intensive intervention program are well worth it. One student remarked that the intensive intervention program was the most important thing that had ever happened to her. Learning to read in an intensive intervention program is the targeted instruction that nonreaders need and that a schoolwide RTI framework can deliver.

Effective intervention across the grade levels includes a hierarchy of instructional support, frequent progress monitoring to measure the effectiveness of the instructional support, and instruction that is data-driven and based on progress-monitoring results. For some students, this intervention can mean an alternate core curriculum or an intensive intervention program. Integral to any intervention is ongoing progress monitoring to determine whether the student is responding to the research-based instruction and intervention.

Specific Learning Disability Determination

Last, RTI focuses on determining eligibility for the specific learning disability category of special education services. The original language reads, “A local education agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures. . . .”¹⁵ In the special education research literature, the process mentioned in this language is generally considered to refer to response to intervention.

The process of determining SLD cannot occur without an effective RTI framework that encompasses prevention and intervention prior to SLD consideration. Only when all children who are suspected of having a learning disability have had research-based instruction and interventions that have been targeted to student needs can the consideration of SLD eligibility be made. The progress-monitoring data from the instruction and intervention become the real-time data that allow the multidisciplinary

team to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses that would point to a specific learning disability. The RTI process cannot be utilized to make SLD decisions unless it is implemented with fidelity, but when it is, it provides rich, valid data that are an integral part of the decision-making process of SLD determination.

What RTI Is Not

Recognizing that RTI is not just about special education eligibility is key to truly understanding what RTI is and is not. First and foremost, RTI is not special education or a special education program. It is not “run” by special education or special education teachers. While students may qualify for special education services through an RTI process, RTI is not about special education programs or services. Some states have determined that their Tier III interventions (more about Tier III in Chapter Two) may be special education services, but usually general education students also benefit from the instructional interventions provided at this level. Some states have made the mistake of allowing special education teachers to take on the brunt of instructional intervention, giving the wrong message that special education and RTI are synonymous. These states are rethinking their approaches and are finding that a greater focus on “good first teaching” is where the greatest strength in the RTI framework lies.

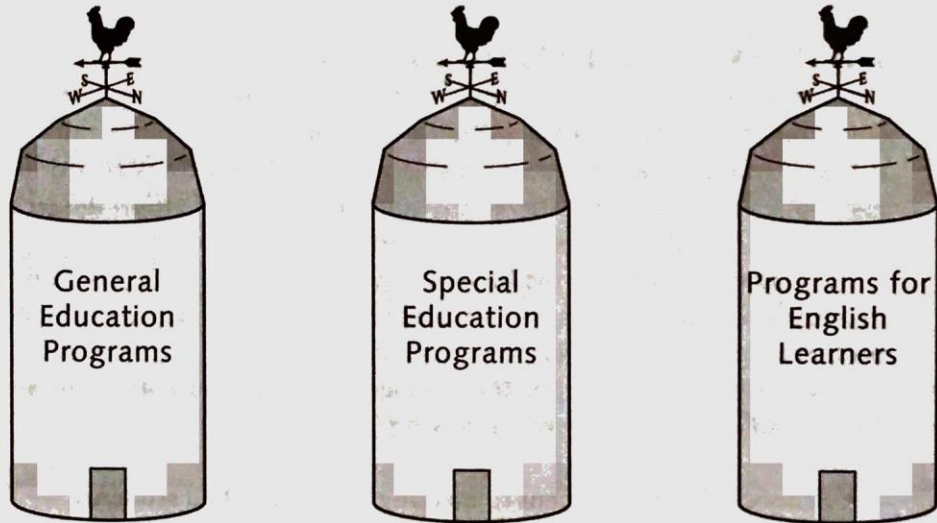
Second, RTI is not a system to “track” students. While it is multi-tiered, the movement between tiers is fluid. In the figures in this book, you will always see an arrow going both ways in or near the RTI model. This arrow emphasizes that students don’t only move up into more intensive interventions; they also move down, back into the less intensive interventions once the targeted instruction has improved their skills. Students are not tracked; frequent progress monitoring does not allow a student to languish for any period of time in an ineffective intervention. If progress-monitoring data do not show results within four data points, the instruction must be adjusted in order for progress to occur. If a lack of progress persists, despite the most intensive interventions, then a referral for special education is warranted. Within an RTI framework, a lack of achievement is not ignored; a student not making progress is never allowed to stay in any one track for any length of time.

Additionally, since RTI represents such a complex and complete structural change, it is not something that can be purchased out of a box. Each school site has its unique student population and its own unique set of resources, so no out-of-the-box program will provide process steps tailored to each specific site. RTI is a schoolwide change model; no two schools will go through this process in exactly the same manner, nor have the exact same needs. That is why a needs assessment and tailored steps are necessary for RTI implementation. The process steps may be similar, but no “product” will meet the challenges of making the paradigm shift necessary to successfully implement an RTI model.

RTI is not a quick fix or the new flavor-of-the-month kind of change. This process takes time—time for changing thinking, time for assessing current systems, time to determine what to keep and what to change, time to train, and finally time to implement. For the weak-hearted, this is not a task to take on thinking that it is the magic bullet for bringing about quick changes to test scores. Most schools and districts take a year to plan, and slowly, very slowly, begin the implementation process. The Center on Instruction, in their implementation research, identified proceeding with caution with a small vanguard group as one successful way to ensure implementation with fidelity.¹⁶

It takes time for programs and teachers to let their silos go. This won't happen overnight. It also takes time for those married to their silo mentality to realize that RTI is not another silo to add to the collection but rather is the barn in which all programs can work together in an effective manner that focuses solely on providing students exactly what they need, no matter what their label. See the integrated instruction approach shown in Figure 1.2.

Not Integrated



Integrated

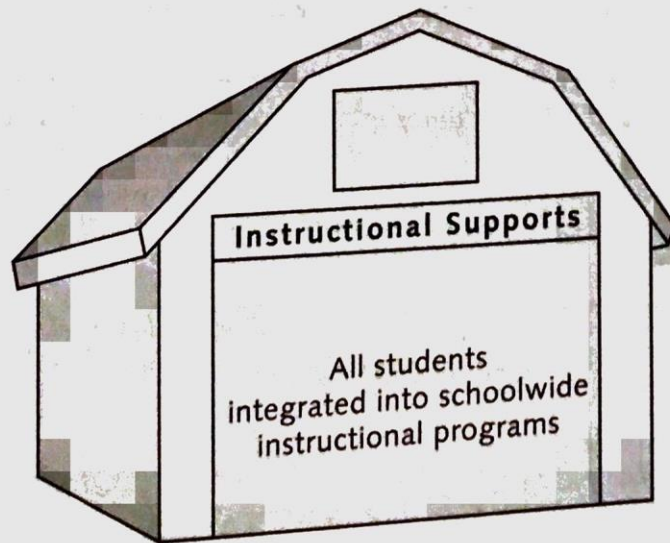


Figure 1.2 An Integrated Instruction Approach