# The Diamond Model: A Unique Elementary RTI Model That Meets the Needs of All Learners

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Literacy Ahead

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response to intervention, three-tiered model, standards-based curriculum

Recent years have brought many changes to the ways in which schools in the United States address learning disabilities in their students. In an attempt to provide all students with appropriate reading instruction and to identify struggling students in a more timely manner, the 2004 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) moved away from a discrepancy model of identification (Meyer, 2000; Peterson & Shinn, 2002) and adopted a modified approach known as *response to intervention* (RTI). Although not without its drawbacks (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008), RTI does represent a shift away from more rigid systems of disability categorization, emphasizing instead differentiated instruction delivered with fidelity to a diverse student body—and as such, it has profound implications not only for students with learning disabilities but also for those with a variety of other learning needs as well. Since 2004, the RTI model has remained most commonly associated with reading (e.g.,

Legere & Conca, 2010) but has also been applied to mathematics education (Riccomini & Witzel, 2009), behavioral difficulties (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008; Lane, 2007), and other areas of school achievement.

The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) described four essential components of RTI: (a) a school-wide, multilevel instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure, (b) screening, (c) progress monitoring, and (d) data-based decision making. The implementation of RTI in a school or program generally follows a fairly standard course, starting with a universal screening process to identify students who are most at risk for reading

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difficulty and continuing through the systematic creation of three ongoing tiers of support where students receive varying forms of reading instruction based on need. The resulting model is depicted as an inverted triangle, where the base of the triangle represents the core classroom curriculum (Tier 1), the central area represents supplemental or targeted interventions (Tier 2), and the tip of the triangle represents individually designed, intensive instruction for students for whom Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions have been inadequate to remediate their reading difficulties (Tier 3). According to McCook (2006), Tier 1 instruction should meet the needs of some 80% of learners, Tier 2 the needs of some 10% to 15%, and Tier 3 the remaining 5% to 10% of students. This article describes the effects RTI has had on a single school and its students in both general and special education through a unique elementary RTI design.

## Tackling the RTI Process

The school was an elementary public school located in the northeastern United States. In addition to the approximately 450 students, the school was also home to a district program for elementary-age students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The student body was 93% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 1% Black, with 10% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

In 2007, prompted by the desire for our students to become more proficient readers, we prepared to establish our own RTI process. Having studied the triangle model, a plan was undertaken to make implementation more inclusive, rather than focusing on a single target population. An expanded model was envisioned that would (a) provide academic stimulation for high achievers, (b) allow a flexible intervention structure for those who struggled academically or behaviorally, and (c) permit students who exhibited more complex combinations of strengths and needs (e.g., those with learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorders) to remain academically engaged throughout the school day. To represent this idea, the traditional triangular depiction of RTI was mirrored into the shape of a diamond that represented not only learners who struggle but also those who exceed grade-level performance. We called our model "The Diamond Model—Where All Kids Shine."

Like all stepwise models, the *diamond model* consists of successive tiers that indicate both degree of students' need and the degree of intervention provided to them. However, rather than consisting of a single triangle representing interventions for students who are experiencing difficulties, it consists of two triangles merged into a diamond shape (see Figure 1). The first of these triangles represents the traditional RTI structure. The second triangle utilizes a similar approach to reflect enrichment opportunities provided to students who are ready for additional academic challenges. Together, these triangles represent the full diversity of students.
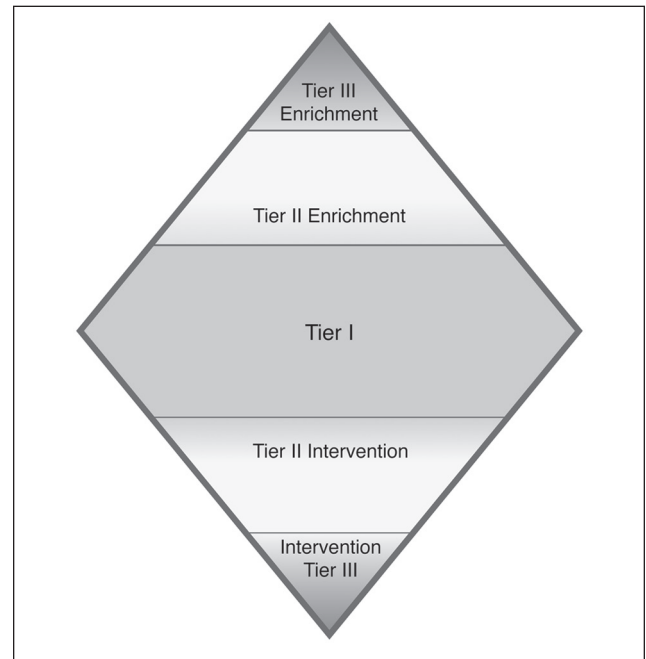


**Figure 1.** The diamond model. Two triangles of tiered interventions merge to create a single structure that serves all students.

Figure 2 lists some of the interventions, supports, and enrichment activities that are currently implemented within the diamond model structure. The proportion of students falling under each portion of the diamond varies according to the needs of a given year but generally falls within levels established in the research literature (e.g., McCook, 2006).

### Intervention Tiers

In this model, Intervention Tier 1 consists of a daily 90-minute block of differentiated literacy instruction. Students participate in guided reading groups, phonics instruction, word work, and other standards-based instruction and are screened three times a year to double-check their overall reading level. Formative and benchmark data from these screenings are examined by multidisciplinary teams in grade-level meetings, where team members coordinate plans for differentiated instruction and determine student placements in further intervention and/or enrichment groups based on individual need. Students who have been determined to need additional intervention continue to participate in the daily reading block but receive additional, Tier 2 targeted research-based intervention from the classroom teacher, Title I tutor, and/or special education team members. Progress monitoring is increased to at least twice a month. Students in Tier 3 intervention also continue to participate in the daily reading block but receive additional intensive and individualized literacy services that are delivered and monitored weekly by the special education team.

| | Identification | Intervention / Resource |
|---|---|---|
| **Tier III Extension** | DIBELS (Very Low Risk), Gates – Stanines 8 & 9, Fountas & Pinnell BAS – Well Above Benchmark, B.L.I.N.G. | Gateway, High Fliers, Junior Great Books, Destination Imagination, Battle of the Books, Lunch Reading Groups, Library Press |
| **Tier II Extension** | DIBELS (Very Low Risk), Gates – Stanines 7 & 8, Fountas & Pinnell BAS-Above Benchmark, B.L.I.N.G. | Classroom Enrichment, Destination Imagination, Battle of the Books, Lunch Reading Groups, Library Press |
| **Tier I** | Professional Learning Teams (PLT), B.L.I.N.G.; Language Arts Coordinator, Speech & O.T. Consultations, Benchmark Screening for All Students, Fountas & Pinnell BAS, DIBELS, Gates, OLSAT, NECAP, Formative Assessments, Speech/Language and OT Screenings | Standards-Based Core Curriculum for All Students, 90 Minute Reading Block, Differentiated Instruction, Standards-Based Instruction Interventions & Extensions, Specialist Curriculum Integrated Activities (CIA), Special Education Co-Teaching, Speech/Language and OT Home Programs, Green Team |
| **Tier II Intervention** | Gates (40 NCE and Below) – Stanines 3 & 4, Fountas & Pinnell BAS – Below Benchmark, DIBELS (Some Risk) – Strategic, Professional Learning Teams (PLT), B.L.I.N.G. | Title I, Special Education Diagnostics, Summer Reading Program, Yellow Team, DIBELS Progress Monitoring (every 2 weeks), Read Naturally, Reading A-Z, Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), Wilson Fundations |
| **Tier III Intervention** | Gates (23 NCE and Below) – Stanines 1 & 2, Fountas & Pinnell BAS – Well Below Benchmark, DIBELS (At-Risk) – Intensive, Professional Learning Teams (PLT), B.L.I.N.G. | Special Education Evaluation, Extended School Year Services, Red Team, DIBELS Progress Monitoring (weekly), Read Naturally, Reading A-Z, Wilson Reading Program, Lindamood Bell, SRA Reading Mastery |

**Figure 2.** Identification and intervention strategies in use at each tier of the diamond.

## Enrichment Tiers

In the diamond model, the upward triangle portion of the diamond depicts the enrichment tiers. Enrichment Tiers 2 and 3 consist of students who have scored highly on Tier 1 and/or Tier 2 assessments of performance, indicating their need to be academically challenged, to varying degrees, beyond the core curriculum.

School personnel work together to provide Tier 2 enrichment activities that appeal to a variety of students. One such activity, Battle of the Books, fosters team building, appreciation of literature, and playful competition with a focus on academics in a yearlong reading event that culminates in teams of students answering questions about books they have read. In another activity, a group of young authors called Library Press meets with the librarian to discuss, edit, and self-publish their work so it may be showcased in the library for other students to borrow. An after-school program run by parent coaches, Destination Imagination, gives teams of students problem-solving activities to complete as well as opportunities to compete in problem-solving contests at the state and national levels. Guitar lessons are

offered to fourth grade students during lunch recess 1 day a week. A thriving student council provides opportunities for students to practice social and leadership skills and engage in such activities as taking visitors for tours of the school, running the school store, and organizing charitable fund-raisers.

At the Tier 3 enrichment level, students can participate in any appropriate Tier 2 enrichment activities and may also be invited to join Gateway, a program for gifted and talented students. To diversify opportunities for Tier 3 enrichment, new programs are field tested as the need arises.

Of particular interest is the way in which the diamond model has encouraged innovation of new activities that combine increased behavioral and environmental support with the high content level of enrichment at Tiers II and III, providing an ever wider array of opportunities for inclusive practices. Examples include (a) students in PASS, the school's behavioral program, (b) receiving one-on-one time with the gateway teacher for students identified as gifted and talented, (c) students with highly focused or specialized areas of personal interest finding a forum for their interests within the enrichment Tier 2 Library Press program, (d) the High Flyers Club, a small-group, low-stress Tier 2 or 3 enrichment opportunity that was designed by the school psychologist for a student with Asperger syndrome but that became open to any student, (e) the use of books on tape to include a student with learning disabilities in Literature Circles, an enrichment book-club-style activity centering on discussions of shared readings, and (f) a student with a hearing impairment, medical challenges, and a severe learning disability in math who participated in Battle of the Books both for the reading activities, which were a good match for her academic strengths, and for the inclusive social opportunities that the group provided.

### Implications for Special Education

Response to intervention has been the subject of widespread discussion (Hoover, 2010; Kavale et al., 2008). Although it holds potential to decrease in special education the overrepresentation of students who are experiencing school failure that is not caused by disability, there is also concern that it may prevent the identification of students who would benefit from special education services. Regardless of the cause, the number of students referred for special education services decreased appreciably, with 18% fewer students identified for services than in previous years and with Tier 2 providing more immediate support for students who might previously have been required to complete a lengthier referral process before receiving individualized instruction. The fact that the number of students designated as with special needs within the school dropped to approximately 4% lower than the number in other elementary schools within the same district further suggests that these

changes may be the result of school-specific initiatives, such as the diamond model, rather than any districtwide reforms that have occurred in the same period.

## The Diamond Model and Other School Initiatives

Few educational initiatives exist in isolation, and RTI is no exception. The diamond model integrated easily with, and even strengthened, other initiatives within the school— most specifically, schoolwide behavior supports, child study teams, and standards-based curriculum.

### Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), a data-driven system of tiered interventions and supports structured to positively affect both schoolwide and individual student behavior, has become increasingly utilized in schools in New England and across the United States (Muscott et al., 2004). When a school is an active participant in PBIS, it is vital that any other schoolwide initiatives integrate well with the already-existing PBIS structure.

In many ways, PBIS is a natural companion for RTI. Similarities in vocabulary, tiered structures, and data collection mechanisms helped our staff to quickly grasp the concept of the newer diamond model and begin coordinating programming across behavioral and academic realms. This has been especially helpful in instances when a student's underlying academic challenges are leading to behavioral difficulties or in the case of students, such as those with autism spectrum disorders, who benefit from highly predictable behavioral expectations paired with high-quality academic opportunities.

### The Child Study Process

Child study teams, a prereferral strategy that was popularized in U.S. schools in the early 1990s (e.g., Fuchs et al., 1990; Ingalls & Hammond, 1996), typically consist of a group of general educators, special educators, and administrators from a specific school who meet to discuss individual student cases. Although child study teams offer many advantages (Rock & Zigmond, 2001), if they are not part of wider systems of change within a school, they can become simply another stage of special education referral.

With the implementation of the diamond model, it soon became clear that a more comprehensive approach was needed. So the child study procedures were updated to provide support that was more consistent with the new RTI process. Today, clusters of newly named *BLING* meetings (i.e., Benchmark Assessments–Learning Strategies–Interventions & Extensions–New Learning–Giving Support) are conducted three times per year and include the

classroom teacher, special educator, speech pathologist, language arts coordinator, special education coordinator, school counselor, Title I tutor, school psychologist, and administrators. Classwide intervention and instructional decisions are made and then adapted to each child based on assessment data gathered as part of RTI and PBIS.

During the course of the year, if teachers feel that an intervention is not working or is no longer appropriate, a meeting is set up to make needed changes. This revised child study process allows examination of all students in each classroom rather than only the few who have been referred, yet is flexible enough to support inclusive education structures and ensure that adequate attention is given to students who are of particular concern to their classroom teacher.

### Standards-Based Curriculum

One of the original catalysts that prompted the school to consider RTI was the adoption of a unified standards-based literacy curriculum across all schools in the district. The diamond model permitted this new literacy curriculum to assume a central role as the core reading instruction for all children in Tier 1, integrating it into the school's structure in a more holistic fashion. As district teams unpacked each standard and developed formative assessments for them, the school restructured its schedule to provide every staff member with a 70-minute grade-level meeting/planning block every other week. During this time RTI data, student achievement, and instructional practices related to the literacy curriculum could be discussed. Although it is not easy to coordinate this much planning time, we have found this level of staff support and participation to be critical to the creation and maintenance of a vibrant RTI structure that is responsive to student needs.

In further keeping with standard-based curriculum, our extension (Tier 2 Enrichment) and intervention (Tier 2 Intervention) lessons are linked to district literacy assessment and instructional requirements. First, students are grouped according to their performance on the relevant district-developed formative assessment and the kind of instruction each will benefit from most. Teachers then collaborate across classrooms to create extension or intervention lessons that are tailored to the needs of a given group, a step that provides an important avenue for personal teaching involvement and recognition of individual student needs within an otherwise highly structured literacy program.

## Conclusions

Research has indicated that three-tier models that integrate more than one area of achievement produce greater student gains than those that focus on reading alone (Stewart, Benner, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2007). Our school has taken this finding to heart, creating an RTI system that is closely tied to other school initiatives, such as inclusive education, PBIS, and standards-based instruction.

Several results have been noticed. Referrals for special needs services outside the inclusive structure have declined, even as accommodations and services for students with identified needs have become integrated in increasingly effective ways into general education classrooms. Disciplinary office referrals decreased from more than 600 in 2003–2004 to 101 in the 2009–2010 school year. More than half of the students who qualified for Title I in previous years have graduated from this supplementary program, with reading scores at grade-level performance.

Every staff member participates in tracking data, designing rigorous curricula, and planning appropriate interventions and extensions. A summer reading program has been put in place, and an increasing number of after-school activities keep students engaged in learning beyond the school day.

We have come to realize that when one attends to academics, as well as the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all children, positive results occur. Moving the process forward one step at a time, we have become a much closer and more caring community of learners. We all understand that teaching children is hard work, but it is our collective responsibility to give students the skills they need to be successful.

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