

# Introduction

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# 1

**C**onsider this scenario. You are a junior high school science teacher. It is late October and a new student enters your classroom. Without the benefit of information from previous schooling, you are left hoping this is a student with the essential prerequisite reading and math skills to be successful in your classroom. Within several days you become concerned. The student appears to be struggling, is not completing work, and is reluctant to ask for assistance. You refer the student to the school's student assistant team by completing prereferral paperwork. The student assistant team meets and recommends the student attend afterschool tutoring and that teachers allow additional time for the student to complete assignments. By early December, the team meets to review the student's status. Because the student is still having difficulties, the team recommends the student be evaluated for special education. Although referrals to special education typically occur in elementary school, referrals at the secondary level often reflect limited viable options for struggling students; despite referrals, very few learning disabilities are diagnosed in middle and high school. The school contacts the parents to obtain permission for an evaluation. After winter break the evaluation begins. The evaluation process is completed in five weeks. An eligibility meeting is held mid-February. Based on the assessment results, the student is found ineligible for Special Education Services because skill deficits are not severe enough to qualify as having a specific learning disability. End result . . . the student continues to struggle as teachers do their best to provide support within the classroom. By the end of the semester the student fails three classes.

Now imagine another scenario. The same student enrolls late October to your school—a school with an RTI support structure already in place. In this school, the student upon enrolling was administered a brief reading, writing, and math screener to assess academic skills. On completion of the screeners, the student then shadows a classmate to learn about the schools policies, meet peers, and become comfortable with the building. By the end of the first

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day, the screening results are scored and reviewed with the student and the student's parents. The screening indicates the student's reading and writing skills are far below grade level. As a result, the student is administered a diagnostic placement test to confirm the screening results and to determine what interventions and placement will best meet his or her needs. The student is then scheduled into a reading/writing intervention class where he or she will receive research validated interventions for one class period per day. Eleven other students are already in this reading intervention class, all with like reading difficulties and similar instructional needs. In addition to an intervention class, the student is assigned an adult mentor and provided information regarding the before and after school tutoring program where students can receive general support in all content area classes. By the end of the semester, the student, as a result of direct interventions, has greatly improved his or her reading and writing skills. Afterschool support has provided both incentive and assistance, allowing the student to be successful in all classes. Most important, the student is passing all his or her classes. By the end of the year, intervention may no longer be necessary, although it could be provided for multiple years if required.

Now, which scenario would you prefer in your school? Which school would you prefer to work in as a teacher? Most important, which system would you prefer for your own middle or high school aged student?

### **School A:**

- Student given a class schedule without screening prerequisite academic skills in reading, writing, and math.
- School waits for records.
- Teacher identifies a concern and then requests assistance for the student.
- Two weeks later, prereferral is initiated.
- Prereferral process completed in December.
- Student is recommended for evaluation for special education.
- Parental consent is obtained.
- Evaluation initiated in January.
- Evaluation complete and eligibility meeting held end of February.
- Student is found ineligible for services as discrepancy requirements are not met.
- Student fails three classes second semester.

### **School B:**

- Student screened as part of enrollment process.
- Screening results are reviewed with student and the student's parents.

- Screening indicates the student is a candidate for intervention in reading and writing.
- The student is given a placement test to determine instructional placement.
- Student is placed in class for reading and writing interventions.
- Student is placed in appropriate intervention the day of enrollment.
- The student is provided an adult mentor and content area tutoring via before and after school programs.

In simple terms, Response to Intervention (RTI) can be a practical, research-based approach to helping students who struggle. It can and should be capable of providing to all students necessary support such as the scenario described for the student in School B. Central to a systems approach to RTI is that students in need of support and/or intervention receive it. A key concept to systems RTI is that teachers are not left to “figure it out.” Rather, a system is in place that is supportive of students and teachers.

Unfortunately, the scenario described in School B is in fact the exception rather than the rule for many secondary schools. Too often, intervention occurs late, is fragmented, and is not specific to the skill deficits of the student. Too often, intervention is not supported by the system as a whole. Indeed, struggling students and the educators who support them face long odds of achieving academic improvement as a result of the traditional practices in secondary schools.

## WHY RTI?

Why is RTI critical in secondary education?

### CONSIDER . . .

- Eighty-five percent of all juveniles who come into contact with the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate.
- Sixty percent of all prison inmates are functionally illiterate, 75 percent of inmates are illiterate at the twelfth-grade level, and 19 percent are completely illiterate.
- Inmates have a 16 percent chance of returning to prison if they receive literacy help, as opposed to 70 percent for those who receive no help.

*(Rosario, 2010)*

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According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), who developed an “on-track indicator” that correlates dropping out of high school with class failure, failing one semester class during the freshman year decreases the likelihood of graduating from 80 percent to 63 percent. Failing two semester classes decreases the likelihood to 44 percent. Fail three semester classes all but assures a student will exit before graduation—only 31 percent chance of graduating. Dropping out of high school would not be so alarming if students were successful once they leave. Contrary to occasional stories of a successful dropout, the overwhelming majority of students who do not complete high school face limited options for meaningful, long-term employment and a life path very different from their educated peers.

### WHO DROPS OUT?

Students with long histories of underachievement drop out disproportionately. Reading is key. According to U.S. Department of Education (2010), more than 60 percent of middle and high school students scored below proficient in reading, meaning the majority of such students do not possess the essential reading skills necessary to pass content area classes at the secondary level.

- Every year nearly 3,030,000 students drop out of school. That's 8,300 students per day.
- Seventy-five percent of crime is committed by high school dropouts.

*(Education Week, Children Trends Database, January 1, 2014)*

Illiteracy and crime are closely related. The Department of Justice states, “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is *welded to reading failure.*”

- Over 70 percent of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above a fourth-grade level.

### APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING STRUGGLING STUDENTS—WHAT HAPPENED IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL?

Because many schools don't have structures in place to implement necessary interventions, most teachers end up isolated and left to their own devices when trying to help students who struggle.

Historically, the most common approaches to help struggling students at the elementary level are the following:

<i>Approach A</i>	<i>Approach B</i>	<i>Approach C</i>
The student receives additional assistance with grade-level work—that is, tutoring, extra help, preferential seating, and so on.	The student is referred for testing to identify potential learning problems, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.	The student is served through remedial services or special education.

The above three approaches, unfortunately, do not have a good track record in bringing about meaningful, long-term improvement in the student’s performance; they are typically delayed, provided inconsistently, and not targeted specifically to the student’s skill deficits. In fact, Approach C—qualifying a student for special and remedial education services, often seen as the goal for testing students in the first place—more often reflects compliance with regulatory policies than alignment with best practices for improving academic outcomes.

In an effort to prevent unnecessary evaluations and placement into special education, the prereferral system has historically been utilized by schools across the United States. The objective of prereferral is to provide intervention plans that will help students succeed in the regular classroom. However well intended, prereferral has been largely a failure; it did not reduce the number of students evaluated and identified for special education. In fact, there is little empirical evidence that most prereferral processes, whether at the elementary or secondary level, resulted in better outcomes for students (Flugum & Reschly, 1994). For most educators familiar with prereferral, such findings are not a shocking revelation.

Like their elementary counterparts, secondary schools often lack a coherent, efficient plan for identifying and providing intervention to students in need. A possible explanation for the ineffectiveness of educational systems may rest with the structures of schools themselves. Interventions most often take the form of a series of strategies, such as those identified in Approach A. Without a systematic procedure for carrying out intensive, targeted, and sustained interventions, teachers have little hope of addressing all but minor and easily fixed problems—the kind not necessarily related to long-term academic failure. In most instances, secondary systems do not provide teachers with necessary resources or supports beyond those already available within their classrooms.

## YOUR TURN

### OVERVIEW—ACTIVITY 1

As a team

1. Think of a student(s) you have known with academic skill deficits. Identify the student(s).
2. What specific interventions were provided to the student? How long were they carried out?
3. What was the outcome for the student (for example, was reading comprehension improved?).
4. Discuss the effectiveness of your school/district's system or plan for addressing secondary students with skill deficits.

### An RTI Approach for Secondary Schools

Two popular approaches to RTI include (1) a standard protocol approach and (2) a problem-solving approach. Schools using a standard protocol approach identify prescribed procedures, assessments, and interventions for students in need of academic and behavioral supports. Procedures within this approach are often aligned to the three tiers, including universal interventions, targeted interventions, and intensive interventions. A problem-solving approach, in contrast, relies on a school-based team to identify specific concerns of individual students then brainstorm interventions. Struggling students in a problem-solving approach are typically addressed individually, each with a specific plan for intervention. Although tailored to specific students' needs, individual plans for intervention are often time- and resource-intensive and difficult to sustain long term, especially if there are multiple students requiring support. Such an approach is especially burdensome if the system as a whole does not become more proactive and preventative because many students will require support.

Although each approach has advantages and disadvantages, RTI, as presented in this manual, maximizes the advantages of both approaches. The result is a systems approach that includes

- a tiered intervention structure for supporting student needs, including targeted and intensive interventions that are research validated and matched to student specific skill deficits;

- supports that do not require students to “qualify” are immediate and provided long term as necessary;
- maximizing the use of all existing resources, including general and special education, for the benefit of all students;
- assessment for the purpose of instructional decision making (screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring);
- adopting general classroom instructional practices that are based on scientific research; and
- engaging in problem solving to address concerns at the systems, group, and individual student levels.

### Pre and Post RTI

The contrast between the traditional, process-driven approach and the new outcome-driven approach represents a fundamental shift in thinking about how we view student problems and the school’s role in addressing these problems. Note the differences in the table below.

<i>Pre RTI</i>	<i>Post RTI</i>
Learning problems are often a sign of a disability.	Learning problems are a breakdown in the instructional process, that is, interaction among instruction, curriculum, environment, and learner.
Test to confirm or rule out a disability.	Assess to identify what needs to be taught and inform instruction.
Delivery of service (remedial or special education).	Improve performance (skill emphasis) and enable learning.

Why the change in approaches? Using the process-driven model, attention was too often devoted to procedural-driven practices that may or may not lead to improved student outcomes. Some flaws with traditional approaches were that

- They emphasized adherence to regulatory policies rather than effective instructional practices.
- Assessments produced too much unnecessary information and too little usable information, such as what to teach and the best way of teaching it.

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- Educators were taught to look for complex explanations for learning problems rather than being trained how to collect and use diagnostic information to address validated skill deficits.
- Many students fell through the cracks as a result of having to qualify for services or received ineffective or delayed intervention even when they did qualify.

### THE NEED FOR A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

The shortcomings of efforts to support struggling students at the secondary level, including special education, have been well documented. Secondary schools are often not structured to meet the needs of students who are not proficient. This creates a perilous position for any one teacher or any particular program such as special education. As a result, regular education itself must be structured to meet the needs of students who routinely walk through the door with academic and behavioral deficits. This requires a proactive structure where interventions are available without delay for any students who need them—no qualifying necessary. In such a structure, student instructional needs are identified through universal screening (often simply using existing assessments such as MAP or state testing) and functional academic assessments (used for diagnostic purposes), interventions are matched to instructional needs of students, and schools are structured to provide what students need by using all available resources within the building.

*Developing systems in secondary schools requires:*

1. Support services be redefined and aligned to student instructional needs. The table below illustrates the various levels of student needs. Note: Each level described can be applied to particular areas such as Language Arts and Math. For instance, students could be Benchmark in Language Arts (LA) and Intensive in Math.

<i>Level of Support</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Implications for Instruction</i>
<b>Advanced</b>	Students above grade level; at or above the 75th percentile	Opportunities for challenge and curriculum advancement
<b>Benchmark</b>	Students at grade level and low risk for academic failure; at or above the 40th percentile	Proactive and preventive; effective instruction designed to maximize learning outcomes

<i>Level of Support</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Implications for Instruction</i>
<b>Strategic</b>	Students 1–2 years below grade level; between the 20th and 39th percentile; at risk for failure	Targeted supports in addition to the core instruction
<b>Intensive</b>	Students significantly below grade level in areas such as reading. Most often 2 or more grade levels below and below the 20th percentile	Intensive supports that accelerate learning in the key skill

2. Paradigm Shift

We must change our way of thinking about education by

- Recognizing that secondary schools must have interventions and supports to address students with skill deficits
- Using assessments that identify what students need and evaluate effectiveness of instruction
- Identifying reasons students struggle; defining the problem in instructional terms
- Altering our view of solutions to secondary student problems (intervention vs. content area support, regular education ownership vs. special education responsibility)
- Changing our expectations for intervention from procedurally driven to solution oriented

3. Professional Development

We must provide professional development for all educators and parents, by

- Providing training in instructional leadership to principals and district office administrators
- Providing training and coaching to teachers using intervention programs
- Providing training and coaching in effective instructional practices to all teachers and instructional staff
- Providing training to related service groups (consultants, psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists) on involvement in a systems approach
- Including training and supports for parents and guardians

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### 4. Administrative and Policy Support

We must support a well-designed structure by

- Ensuring that school administrators are trained on how to organize and support effective structures, including curriculum, instruction, and environments
- Advocating that building and district resource decisions are based on student needs and performance data
- Providing administrative leadership and support of data-based decision making
- Developing policy to support the use of student outcomes as the measure of effective systems and as a means of determining program efficacy

### **From Theory to Practice**

To make the big ideas of RTI workable and sustainable, we need a protocol for addressing the needs of all students. Assessment should identify students in need, inform instruction, and evaluate student progress and program effectiveness. Instruction must be scientifically validated and include teaching practices that have been demonstrated to be highly effective for students to which they are applied. Problem solving for systems and individuals must be an integral part of the structure.

### **RTI Core Beliefs**

One danger of educational change, particularly at the secondary level, is that we begin with a vision of what we need but end up with something that more resembles what we already had in the first place or we make very minor changes to an existing system, yet expect major results. Indeed, familiar practices and long-standing school structures are difficult to change. Change requires a clear vision, planning, time, patience, and a relentless pursuit toward achieving a culture that does not accept student failure as an option.

More than maintaining the daily practices associated with RTI, overriding goals must also be recognized and expressed to ensure we do not lose track of the RTI purpose. Although implementation may vary from school to school, RTI

- Is about improving student outcomes
- Provides support to teachers and guardians

- Allows for immediate intervention
- Focuses on alterable academic and behavioral skills and evaluates progress
- Assures no student falls between the cracks
- Seeks to solve problems rather than create placements
- Uses assessment for the purpose of instruction and decision making
- Maximizes use of all resources for the purpose of improving student outcomes

We have witnessed over the last 30 years numerous attempts at planned educational change. The benefits have not nearly equaled the costs, and all too often, the situation has seemed to worsen. We have, however, gained clearer and clearer insights over this period about the do's and don'ts of bringing about change. . . . **One of the most promising features of this new knowledge about change is that successful examples of innovation are based on what might be most accurately labeled "organized common sense."** (Fullan, 1991, pp. xi-xii)

## SUMMARY

### A Systems Approach to RTI

A well-designed structure aligns appropriate levels of supports to students at various levels, ensuring supports are highly effective. A systems approach includes the following essential components:

- A system that meets the needs of the full range of students (Benchmark, Strategic, Intensive (B, S, I)).
- Universal screening and placement of students according to instructional needs in reading, writing, math, and behavior.
- Differentiated instruction to meet the needs of instructional groups and individual students.
- Research-based interventions and instructional practices.
- Frequent progress monitoring to inform decision making.
- Ongoing professional development to support system-wide structures of instruction.
- Data used to evaluate the effectiveness of schoolwide systems and instructional effectiveness.
- Problem-solving teams to identify and address unhealthy or less effective systems.

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- Intervention plans for students whose needs cannot be adequately addressed within the system; for example, for students who require intervention or instruction not available as part of the overall system.
- Applying information collected during implementation of the above components as well as the student's response to intervention for determining eligibility for special education. Such information includes
  - progress-monitoring data,
  - review of intervention (duration and general effectiveness for similar students),
  - intervention quality and level of fidelity,
  - instructor's training and level of expertise, and
  - efforts to intensify or change interventions depending on student progress.

### **PURPOSE OF THE CORE TRAINING MANUAL**

RTI as presented in this manual is a systematic, systems approach that uses all the resources within a building to address students with academic and behavioral difficulties.

This core training manual includes the essential components needed to implement a systematic and comprehensive Response to Intervention approach. For secondary schools, the primary focus is on the development and use of a three-tier instructional model and includes

- effective systems and structured levels of support;
- data-based decision making;
- research-based interventions; and
- problem solving for systems, groups, and individual students.

This training manual translates current educational research into practical application to help schools maximize resources and outcomes for all students.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE CORE TRAINING MANUAL**

Participants in the training program will

- Understand the essential components of a tiered instructional model

- Develop and evaluate the effectiveness of a three-tier instruction model
- Identify schoolwide considerations involved in student achievement and outcomes
- Establish and complete a process for universal screening
- Acquire a working knowledge of curriculum-based measurement and other progress-monitoring techniques
- Evaluate and use problem-solving techniques to improve systems efficiency and resulting outcomes for all students
- Use functional assessments to evaluate and determine instructional needs for students
- Systematically connect and use formative progress monitoring to inform instruction at the systems, group, and individual student levels
- Use functional academic assessments and problem solving to create a comprehensive student Intervention Plan (I-Plan)
- Understand the essential components of using an RTI approach to special education