

Practitioners' Chat

WHAT DOES RTI MEAN FOR THE CLASSROOM?

Response to Intervention, a framework for modifying instruction based on early evaluation of student-learning needs, is gaining traction in schools even as some educators struggle with the approach. Recently, in a Web chat on teachermagazine.org, two RTI experts, JUDY ELLIOTT, chief academic officer of the Los Angeles Unified School District, and DOUGLAS FUCHS, professor and Nicholas Hobbs Chair in Special Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, answered readers' questions on the method. Here are some excerpts from the discussion.

Why is it that some regular education and special education teachers feel threatened by RTI?

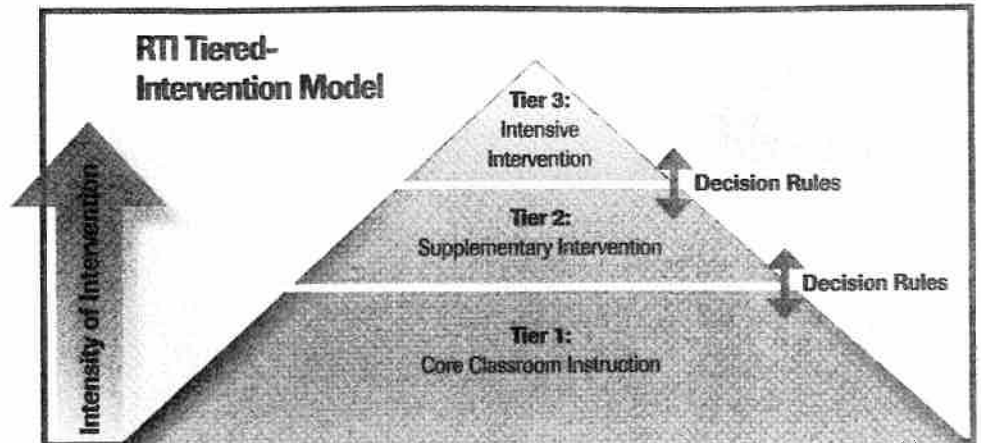
JUDY ELLIOTT: We have for decades worked in silos in education. Now we are saying come and talk about what is working for all students. We have functioned for many years in what I call private classrooms and publicly shared little data. Now, in the past decade, things have shifted. I do not see folks resistant to RTI per se but rather to change. We went through this when "inclusion" came along. Resistance was often driven by fear of the unknown, a lack of knowing what and how to work with special education students, etc. Resistance is a symptom of a bigger issue.



Have you found successful ways to get teacher buy-in?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Indeed, consensus is the first step to building an integrated approach for instruction. I refer you to NASDSE.org to see the blueprints on site and district development of

RTI. Consensus of both is the key. Folks that are resistant to change, in my opinion, are responding to a fear of loss of some sort.



SOURCE: Response to Intervention Consortium, Nebraska Department of Education

Having open, courageous conversations about what is working, what is not, what areas of concern teachers have is the start of laying the important groundwork for RTI. Teachers are absolutely key players in this—they are the ones working with students daily and know best what the needs of students and proper interventions are.

How effective is the RTI model in a middle school? Is there any research that supports that it works at that level?

DOUGLAS FUCHS: RTI was initially modeled after Reading First, the early-intervention centerpiece of NCLB. As such, it was conceived as a service-delivery system for the primary grades (K-3). Moreover, it was initially intended for reading because the research on early reading is very strong. During the past 3-5 years, we've seen RTI morph into "something for everyone." The fact of the matter is that there is very little research on how to think about RTI, let alone implement it, in middle and high school. I'm not saying RTI at these levels is wrong-headed; rather, there is very little empirically to guide us at this time.

We are struggling with the intervention portion of RTI. The call is for research-based strategies. Is there an accepted resource for these strategies/lessons that are research-based?

DOUGLAS FUCHS: This is an important

question. I've got two suggestions. First, there is a newly established National Center on RTI funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Its Web site is: rti4success.org. Its email is: rticenter@air.org. The Web site has important pages and links that will lead you to what you're looking for. Second, there is the RTI Action Network. Its Web site is: RTINetwork.org. I highly recommend these sites.

How much professional development is required to implement RTI in a school system?

JUDY ELLIOTT: The degree of PD is dependent upon what you have in place already. There is a significant amount of not only PD but planning and infrastructure-building that needs to be done to sustain the practice of RTI. Start with a needs assessment to get the ball rolling. See NASDSE.org site blueprints and RTINetwork.org for more information.

What is the administrator's role?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Huge! Leadership is so very critical in this as well as in any innovation or change in schools. The administrator is the leader, coach, data consumer, and the person that works to align all that goes on at the school site to support RTI. The administrator makes decisions of what goes to the back burner or off the stove so that

RTI work can be done. This cannot and should not be rolled out as another initiative. It is a way to integrate and better coordinate intervention and efforts currently going on and also assess things that are being implemented. What do the data indicate? The administrator is the leader that brings folks around the table to have open dialogue about what is working, what isn't, and why. Leadership is huge with this.

How can RTI be adapted for gifted learners?

JUDY ELLIOTT: RTI is a framework that works for all students, including gifted. Gifted students, too, have learning and behavioral needs. Using the pyramid or triangle of RTI, specific interventions can be identified to support highly able students that need an extra scoop at Tier 2 or more specially challenging opportunities at Tier 3. In Portland, Oregon, there is a school for students in the top one percent in achievement. They are Tier 3 and are being challenged as well as effectively supported with their giftedness. So yes, the RTI concept works for gifted.

What role should literacy and math specialists play in each of the tiers of RTI? Should we offer to pull those kids who struggle? Or should we foster a climate of differentiation with teachers right in the classroom?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Nice question. The role of specialists should be changed according to the needs of your building and students you serve. The bottom line for RTI is predicated on effective instruction first and foremost. Support at Tier 1 is critical so that truly the students that need Tier 2 and 3 are not curriculum casualties.

I would not suggest pulling students that struggle unless that fits into a tiered-intervention approach for the school. You need to look at multiple measures to decide which students are doing well or struggling (a.k.a universal screens), based on data you build for tiers of intervention that increase in time and intensity.

Please explain the role of a school psychologist post-RTI implementation.
DOUGLAS FUCHS: School psychologists should have strong, substantive roles at

the building level, helping teachers monitor school performance at the various tiers, and explaining, when necessary, what a child's time-series data are saying, whether and how instruction at Tier 2 or 3 might be changed to accelerate a student's performance.

A few school-psychologist academics encourage a large reduction in the number of children identified as special needs. They argue that if the current proportion of children with special needs is about 12 percent nationally, we can get this number down to 3 percent.

With such a reduction, they hope school psychologists will be liberated from their testing roles and will have more opportunity to act as I've described above. My concern is that some of their assumptions are not tenable.

Read the complete discussion at:
www.teachermagazine.org/go/rti_chat



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