



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

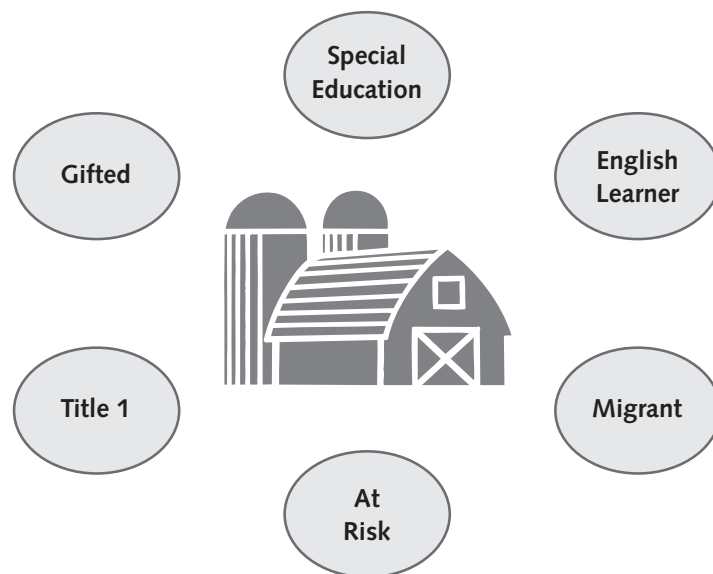


Figure 1.1 Disjuncted Incrementalism

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.

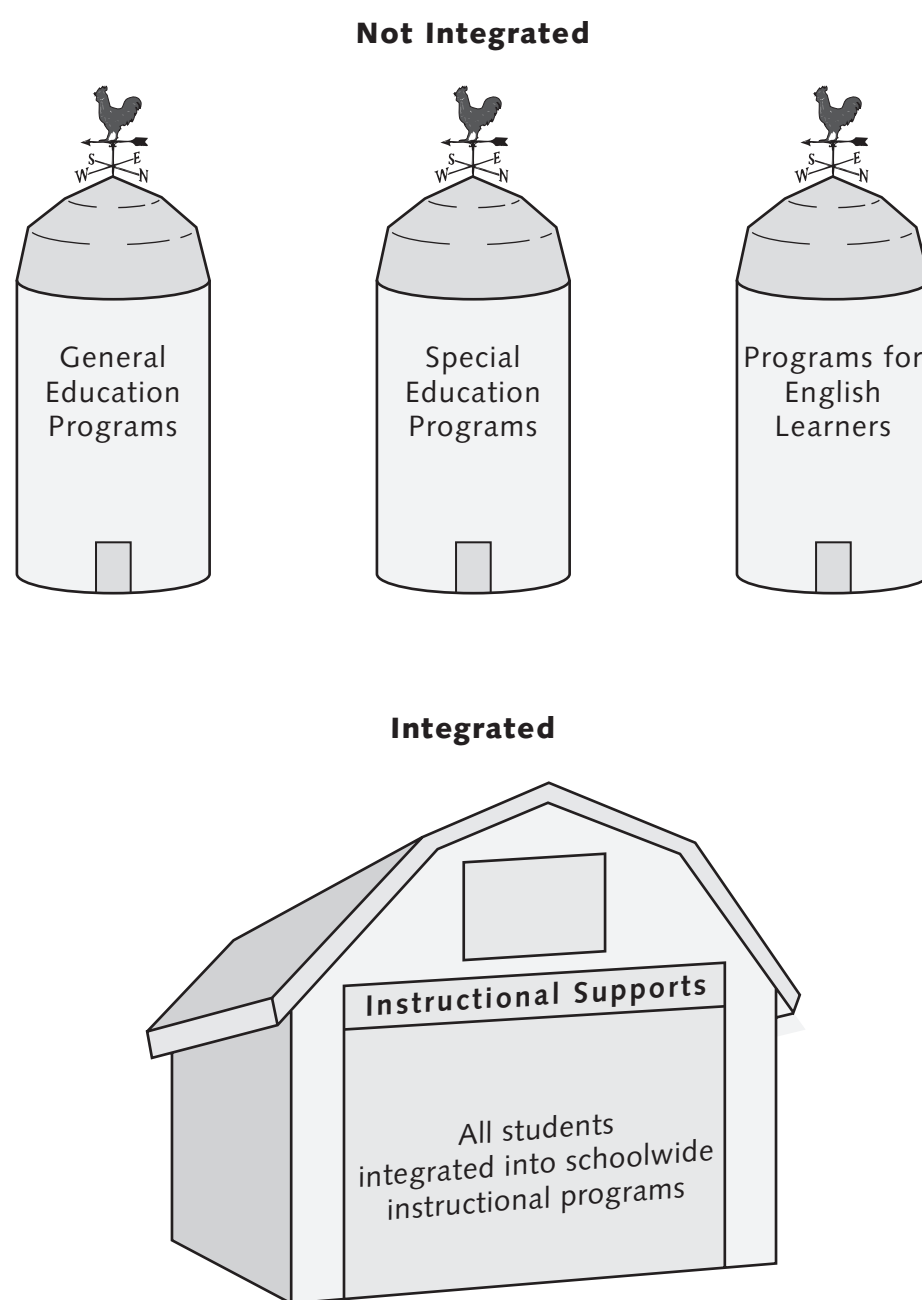


Figure 1.2 An Integrated Instruction Approach



Core Principles of RTI

RTI is based on a singular belief in doing what is best for students, on the core principle that *ALL children CAN learn*. If teachers, administrators, and staff believe that students with disabilities, students who are English learners, and students who live in poverty cannot learn, then RTI will not prove successful, and the self-fulfilling prophecy will have been fulfilled. Coming to common ground on this primary core component can take some time. Sometimes, it will take the few who believe to step forward and move ahead of the others, using data as their proof that they are correct in their beliefs about student ability.

Identifying Core Components

While the list of core components differs among researchers, the most common core components are related to data-based decision making, about universal screening and progress monitoring. Based on this data, research-based instruction and interventions are applied within a multi-tiered instruction and intervention model that is frequently monitored for fidelity of implementation. Professional development is also included, as it is an essential part of providing effective research-based instruction and intervention. In addition, many listings of core components include a problem-solving process or a problem analysis process as part of the RTI structure.

In the ongoing work of RTI implementation, the core components most often recognized as essential are the following:

- Schoolwide commitment to meeting the needs of all students
- Universal screening of all students
- Multi-tiered research-based instruction including “good first” teaching
- Data-based decision making through ongoing progress monitoring to assess the effectiveness of instruction
- Targeted interventions that increase over time

Many different experts have identified the core components of RTI. While each expert’s approach may differ in one or two aspects, all contain certain commonalities that focus on multiple tiers of intervention, monitoring of progress, and targeted intervention. The following two examples of core components provide an overlapping view of the necessary elements of an RTI framework.

Core Components of RTI

Universal Screening

Evaluation of all students to systematically identify:

- Those making adequate progress
- Those at some risk of failure if not provided extra assistance
- Those at high risk of failure if not provided specialized supports



Continuous Progress Monitoring

Student progress assessed on regular and frequent basis:

- To identify when inadequate growth trends occur
- To increase instructional support when needed

Continuum of Evidence-Based Instructional Practices and Intervention

A hierarchy of varying intensity levels of instructional support

- Core curriculum for all students
- Modification of the core by increasing instructional time and intensity
- Intensive instruction or curriculum for those not responding to the modification of the core

Data-Based Decision Making and Problem Solving

Instructional decisions based on student performance

- Core curricular performance
- Performance on modifications or adaptations

Implementation Fidelity

Specific procedures for regular documentation of the level of implementation of each feature of the model

Source: L. Fox, J. Carta, P. Strain, G. Dunlap, and M. L. Hemmeter, *Response to Intervention and the Pyramid Model*. Tampa: University of South Florida, Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children, 2009.

Necessary Elements of an RTU Framework

High-Quality Research-Based Classroom Instruction

All students receive high-quality general education classroom instruction that is research based. All teachers assume an active role in the assessment of classroom curriculum.

Universal Screening

All students are screened with specific criteria to determine who needs further assessment.

Progress Monitoring at All Tiers

Progress on meeting expected standards is monitored and the effectiveness of interventions determined.

Research-Based Interventions at Tiers II and III

Research-based interventions are applied based on student needs.

Fidelity Measures

Systematic assessment of the fidelity of the instruction and intervention is performed.

Source: D. F. Mellard and E. Johnson, *RTI: A Practitioner's Guide to Implementing Response to Intervention*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2008.

RTI Approaches

There are two common RTI approaches: the standards treatment approach and the problem-solving approach. Both look carefully at the fact that some students are struggling and that they need attention. Both focus on schoolwide screening, targeted instruction, and continuous progress monitoring within a multi-tiered model of instruction.

Standard Treatment Approach

Although individualized intervention through problem-solving methods was the norm in early RTI models, the research suggests that a set of evidence-based practices or standard treatments be provided for those students who display predictable difficulties in learning, specifically in reading. These standard approaches are designed to be used in a systematic manner with all participating students and are usually delivered in a small group in a prescriptive manner. This standard treatment approach has a high probability of producing change for large numbers of students.

In the standard treatment approach, all students are screened, and when students fall below a certain cut score, further assessment may determine the need for a standard intervention. This group may include students within a certain score range who receive supplemental or additional instructional time, and others who receive more intensive instruction. The intervention prescribed for the group that falls within each cut score range is monitored for effectiveness through frequent and ongoing progress monitoring. The treatment provided may be a predetermined research-based program, such as an intensive reading or math intervention program. If the response to the treatment is not adequate, an additional treatment may be applied. If there is still a lack of progress, a referral to special education may be made.

Problem-Solving Approach

In the problem-solving approach, screening is of primary importance. Students identified as at risk through screening are brought to the problem-solving team. The team reviews the students' needs that have been identified through screening and develop a plan to meet those needs. In the problem-solving approach, the problem is defined, the problem is analyzed, a plan is developed, and the plan is evaluated for effectiveness. Figure 1.3 shows the problem-solving method that is essential to the problem-solving approach.¹⁷ This customized intervention for individual students has been foundational in the RTI models developed in numerous states.

If after several attempts at problem solving, the student is still not responding to the intervention, a special education referral may also be made.

The approach taken differs from state to state, and many states use an RTI framework that is a combination of both. Lynn and Doug Fuchs, experts on RTI, recommend that schools rely on a combination of approaches, with a standard treatment protocol used for academic difficulties and a problem-solving approach used for obvious behavioral problems and persistent learning problems combined with behavioral problems.¹⁸

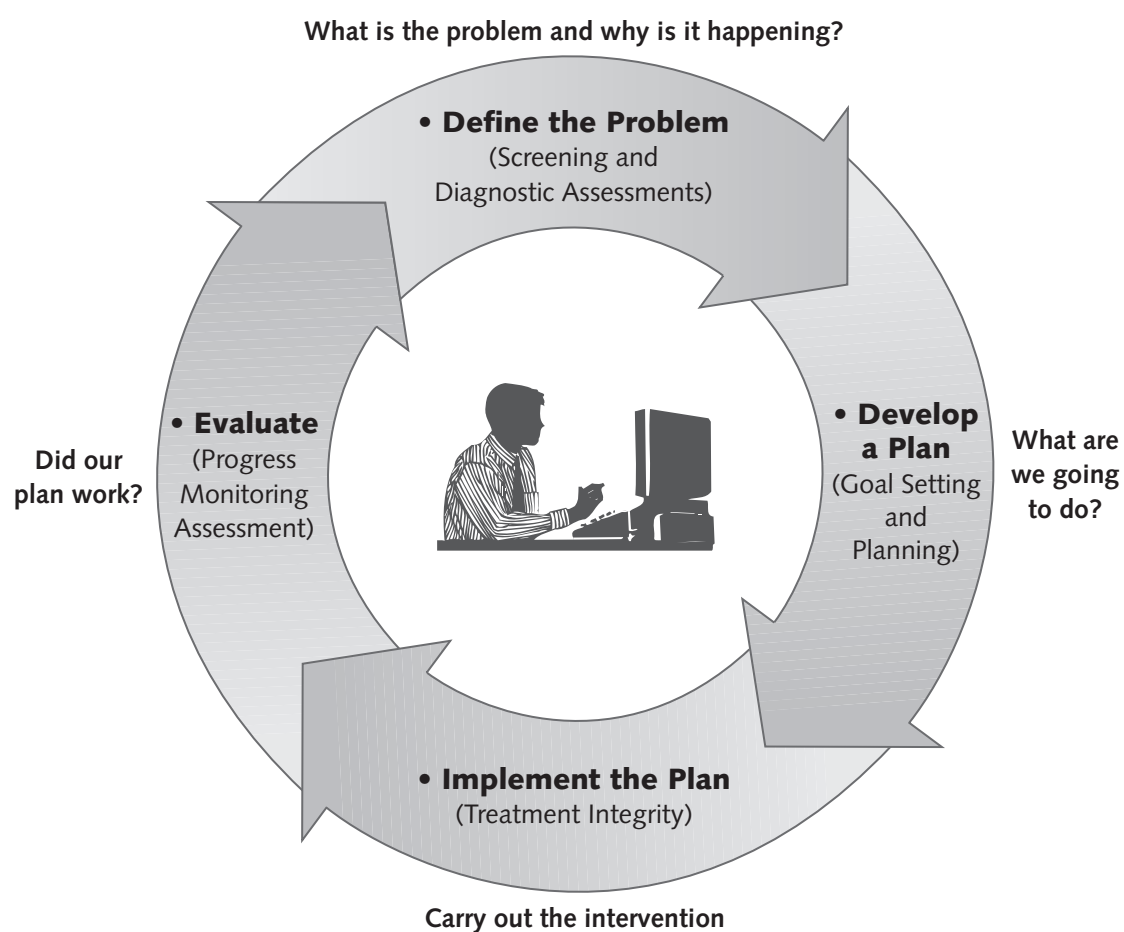


Figure 1.3 Problem-Solving Process

The combined approach focuses on data from screening and further assessment to identify those students who are at risk or in need of intervention. Cut scores are determined, and a standard treatment or intervention is applied. If a student fails to respond to this intervention, then the team takes a problem-solving approach in which individualized interventions are developed and applied. If the student continues with an inadequate response, a referral to special education is made. This combination of approaches provides the special education multidisciplinary team with ample data for making decisions about special education eligibility.

Both of these approaches rely heavily on data for decision making. Some states have identified their RTI models as “data-based decision-making models.” Just as RTI cannot occur without screening, RTI cannot continue without progress monitoring and data. Students not making progress in an intervention program do not exit and move up to a more intensive intervention because of a teacher’s hunch or a feeling. The data make it very clear just how and where the student is struggling. Data collected over time allow patterns of strengths and weaknesses to emerge that are used to make special education eligibility decisions. Data also play an essential role in identifying the effectiveness of interventions and the time when students should return to the core or to a less intensive intervention.

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Benefits of RTI

There are numerous benefits in implementing an RTI framework, and students receive the greatest reward. Screening identifies student needs, and instructional interventions are immediately applied to these needs. The student does not need to wait to qualify for a label that indicates a need for small-group targeted instruction. Students experience less frustration, and instructional holes can be filled as soon as they are recognized. Reading and instructional failures are averted by this simple process.

Parents are satisfied that their child is receiving the help that he or she needs. They do not need to fight for or wait for a special education referral to get their child the help that is warranted. Parents appreciate the instructional supports that their child gets, and a positive collaborative relationship between parents and the school, rather than a combative defensive one, is created.

Meeting the needs of all students in a classroom is an impossible task. Many teachers feel isolated and alone in trying to “get to” all the kids in their classes and provide them with what they need. This leads to early teacher burnout. An RTI approach provides teachers a golden opportunity to share the instructional responsibility of their students. Teachers can utilize peer problem-solving strategies and use teaming across the grade level to share students and specific student needs. Teachers feel supported by each other and find that the collegial support of their grade-level or content area team provides them with the collaborative problem-solving opportunities that they need.

According to a teacher retention study conducted in California in 2007, the number one reason for teachers staying in the teaching profession is collegiality. Teachers commented that when they had at least one other person whom they could talk to and problem-solve with, they could remain in teaching. The number one reason for leaving the field was isolation and a feeling of nowhere to turn.¹⁹ Inherent to the RTI structure is problem solving and collaboration.

Site administrators benefit tremendously from the RTI framework, not just because it guarantees good instruction and instructional practices, but because the collaboration between teachers provides for a positive school climate that is focused on positive academic and behavioral outcomes. When teachers are working together, problem-solving together, looking at data together, and are focused on academic achievement for all students, administrators find that they can focus on instruction rather than on staff management.

RTI frameworks, even when instituted at the site level, provide a positive payoff at the district level. When schools employ an RTI framework and philosophy, they carefully scrutinize all their resources and use them to the most advantageous manner. In the RTI framework, silos are broken down; a more effective and cohesive use of financial and human resources is the result. While RTI in IDEA legislation does not bring with it any financial resources, schools and districts that focus on decision making based on academic achievement for all, within the structure of the barn rather than the silo, ultimately will not need more funding but should be able to implement the best possible programs with existing resources.

Chapter Two will provide further insight into the what of the multi-tiered RTI framework, as the concepts and practices of each tier are clearly defined and identified. Having a clear understanding of the impetus behind the change and the structures that make the change brings you one step closer to implementation.

Wrapping Up the Main Points

How does RTI improve on history? It takes a fragmented system and makes it cohesive. It provides for a fair distribution of resources that are allocated to the point of need. Students get fair treatment, not equal treatment. Students who need more, get more. Students don't need to wait for the correct labels to be applied in order to obtain resources. Students are provided with opportunities for an equitable education in an all-inclusive environment. Students become "ours," and within the RTI framework, each and every one of our students has a chance to experience academic and behavioral achievement.

