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Response to Intervention (RTI): A Primer for Parents

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A major concern for parents as well as teachers is how to help children who experience difficulty learning in school. Everyone wants to see their child excel, and it can be very frustrating when a child falls behind in learning to read, do math, or achieve in other subjects. Children who have the most difficulty are often referred for an evaluation to determine if they need and qualify for special education services. The term “learning disability” has been used for many years to explain why some children of normal intelligence nevertheless have much difficulty learning basic skills such as reading.

Some new federal laws have directed schools to focus more on helping all children learn by addressing problems earlier, before the child is so far behind that a referral to special education services is warranted. These laws include the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004. Both laws underscore the importance of providing high quality, scientifically-based instruction and interventions, and hold schools accountable for the progress of all students in terms of meeting grade level standards.

What Are the Essential Components of RTI?

Simply, “Response to Intervention” refers to a process that emphasizes how well students respond to changes in instruction. The essential elements of an RTI approach are: the provision of scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in general education; monitoring and measurement of student progress in response to the instruction and interventions; and use of these measures of student progress to shape instruction and make educational decisions. A number of leading national organizations and coalition groups, including the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities and the 14 organizations forming the 2004 Learning Disabilities (LD) Roundtable coalition, have outlined the core features of an RTI process as follows:

- High quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education.
- Universal (school-wide or district-wide) screening of academics and behavior in order to determine which students need closer monitoring or additional interventions.
- Multiple tiers of increasingly intense scientific, research-based interventions that are matched to student need.
- Use of a collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation, and monitoring of the intervention process.

- Continuous monitoring of student progress during the interventions, using objective information to determine if students are meeting goals.
- Follow-up measures providing information that the intervention was implemented as intended and with appropriate consistency.
- Documentation of parent involvement throughout the process.
- Documentation that the special education evaluation timelines specified in IDEA 2004 and in the state regulations are followed unless both the parents and the school team agree to an extension.

What Are the Key Terms?

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an array of procedures that can be used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in instruction. RTI provides an improved process and structure for school teams in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions.

Universal Screening is a step taken by school personnel early in the school year to determine which students are “at risk” for not meeting grade level standards. Universal screening can be accomplished by reviewing recent results of state tests, or by administering an academic screening test to all children in a given grade level. Those students whose test scores fall below a certain cut-off are identified as needing more specialized academic interventions. Student Progress Monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used to frequently assess students’ academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Progress monitoring procedures can be used with individual students or an entire class.

Scientific, Research-Based Instruction refers to specific curriculum and educational interventions that have been proven to be effective –that is, the research has been reported in scientific, peer-reviewed journals.

What Role Does RTI Play in Special Education Eligibility?

IDEA 2004 offers greater flexibility to school teams by eliminating the requirement that students must exhibit a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement in order to be found eligible for special education and related services as a student with a learning disability. This increased flexibility has led to a growing interest in using RTI as part of an alternative method to traditional ability/achievement discrepancy comparisons. IDEA 2004 addresses RTI procedures within several contexts.

Effective instruction and progress monitoring. For students to be considered for special education services based on a learning disability they first must have been provided with effective instruction and their progress measured through “data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement.” Furthermore, results of the student progress monitoring must be provided to the child’s parents.

Evaluation procedures. The law gives districts the option of using RTI procedures as part of the evaluation procedures for special education eligibility. Comprehensive assessment is still required under the reauthorized law, however. That means that schools still need to carefully examine all relevant aspects of a student’s performance

and history before concluding that a disability does or does not exist. As before, schools must rule out learning problems that are primarily the result of factors such as poor vision, hearing, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, lack of appropriate instruction, or limited English proficiency.

Early Intervening Services. IDEA 2004 addresses the use of RTI procedures is by creating the option of using up to 15% of federal special education funds for “early intervening services” for students who have not been identified as needing special education, but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in the general education setting. The types of services that can be included are central to the RTI process, and include professional development for teachers and school staff to enable them to deliver scientifically based academic and behavioral interventions, as well as educational evaluations, services, supports, and scientifically based literacy instruction.

How Can Parents Be Involved in the RTI Process?

The hallmarks of effective home-school collaboration include open communication and involvement of parents in all stages of the learning process. Being informed about your school’s RTI process is the first step to becoming an active partner. Both the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities advise parents to ask the following questions:

- Does our school use an RTI process? (Be aware that your child’s school may call their procedures a “problem solving process,” or may have a unique title for their procedures, e.g., Instructional Support Team, and not use the specific RTI terminology.)
- Are their written materials for parents explaining the RTI process? How can parents be involved in the various phases of the RTI process?
- What interventions are being used, and are these scientifically based as supported by research?
- What length of time is recommended for an intervention before determining if the student is making adequate progress?
- How do school personnel check to be sure that the interventions were carried out as planned?
- What techniques are being used to monitor student progress and the effectiveness of the interventions? Does the school provide parents with regular progress monitoring reports?
- At what point in the RTI process are parents informed of their due process rights under IDEA 2004, including the right to request an evaluation for special education eligibility?
- When is informed parental consent obtained and when do the special education evaluation timelines officially commence under the district’s RTI plan?

What Are the Potential Benefits of RTI?

Perhaps the most commonly cited benefit of an RTI approach is that it eliminates a “wait to fail” situation because students get help promptly within the general education setting. Secondly, an RTI approach has the potential to reduce the number of students

referred for special education services. Since an RTI approach helps distinguish between those students whose achievement problems are due to a learning disability versus those students whose achievement problems are due to other issues such as lack of prior instruction, referrals for special education evaluations are often reduced. Finally, parents and school teams alike find that the student progress monitoring techniques utilized in an RTI approach provide more instructionally relevant information than traditional assessments.

What Are Next Steps in Implementing RTI Approaches?

There are many specific issues that must be addressed in order to effectively implement RTI approaches. Schools must be prepared to offer a variety of proven instructional strategies; staff must be trained to measure student performance using methods that are sensitive to small increments of growth; parents must be kept informed of these new procedures and made partners in the process. Teams must also determine how they will define an “adequate” response to an intervention—how much progress over what period of time will be the benchmark to determine if an intervention is successful? While forthcoming federal regulations will offer guidance, each school district will need to develop its own procedures based on their state regulations, resources and the needs of its student population.

References and Web Resources

IDEA 2004: See the final bill posted at:
<http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/108th/education/idea/conferencereport/confrept.htm>

National Association of School Psychologists—www.nasponline.org

NASP's has a variety of resource materials and helpful factsheets for parents. Also see the report of the 2004 LD Roundtable posted on the NASP website at:
<http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/2004LDRoundtableRecsTransmittal.pdf>

National Association of State Directors of Special Education — www.nasdse.org

See the document: Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation

National Center for Learning Disabilities—www.ld.org

NCLD provides essential information, promotes research and programs to foster effective learning, and advocates for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) — www.ldonline.org/njcld

The NJCLD is comprised of organizations committed to the education and welfare of individuals with learning disabilities. See the paper: Responsiveness to Intervention and Learning Disabilities http://www.ldonline.org/pdf/rti_final_august_2005.pdf

National Research Center on Learning Disabilities — www.nrcl.org

The NRCLD engages in research, develops recommendations, and provides training.
See the article: Understanding Responsiveness to Intervention in Learning Disabilities
<http://www.nrclld.org/publications/papers/mellard.pdf>

National Center on Student Progress Monitoring — www.studentprogress.org

The National Center on Student Progress Monitoring provides information and technical assistance to implement progress monitoring techniques.

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