

# RTI IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## One High School English Department's Journey

Christy Khan and Daryl Mellard  
The University of Kansas

The research literature currently does not provide the experimental or even evaluative evidence of implementing response to intervention (RTI) in the secondary schools. In the absence of such information school district staff might look for examples to guide their discussions. The following text provides an illustration of RTI in a secondary school. Although this example does not illustrate all of the components associated with implementing RTI in a research study or an elementary school setting, the description does provide guidance.

This illustration focuses on one Midwestern high school that offers classes for grades 9 through 12 and has a total enrollment of about 1,500. This high school is one of four in a district that serves about 20,500 students. Although the school district is largely considered a suburban setting, its boundaries include rural farming communities as well.

The English department has been targeting core reading instruction (primary level of prevention) since 2004 when the district implemented a standard reading protocol program, Read 180 (2008), to address needs of students who had significant reading deficiencies. In addition, the 13 English teachers met weekly in a professional learning community (PLC) to discuss improving strategies for all aspects of language and literature instruction. Despite these efforts, the school's state reading assessment scores were consistently below the district average. So during the 2007-2008 school year, the 11th-grade English teachers and the reading specialist decided

### IN THIS BRIEF

- A suburban high school language arts department designs a tiered program for 11th graders to address a large percentage of low scores on state exams.

to take a more systematic approach to reading instruction and interventions prior to administering the state reading assessment to their students in the spring.

These teachers suspected that the previous year's decline in state reading scores was not accurately reflecting the students' abilities. However, determining whether the decline in scores was due to students' having true reading disabilities or simply a lack of motivation and effort on the state assessment was difficult due to conflicting data. For example, a review of the scores indicated some students with less than proficient scores on the state assessment performed well on formative and summative assessments in their reading intensive courses, while others with low grades on classroom assessments scored extremely high on the state assessment. Since students with identified reading disabilities were already receiving their core reading intensive instruction through the Read 180 program, the teachers hypothesized that although



**NATIONAL CENTER ON RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION**

University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning  
with American Institutes for Research and Vanderbilt University  
October 2008

some students may still have significant unidentified reading deficiencies as a result of gaps in past reading instruction, the large percentage of low scores on the state exam might indicate many students simply did not put forth effort during testing. In order to address both concerns, the English department decided to implement a reading intervention program for the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The program, called “Friday Reads,” was based on common assessments.

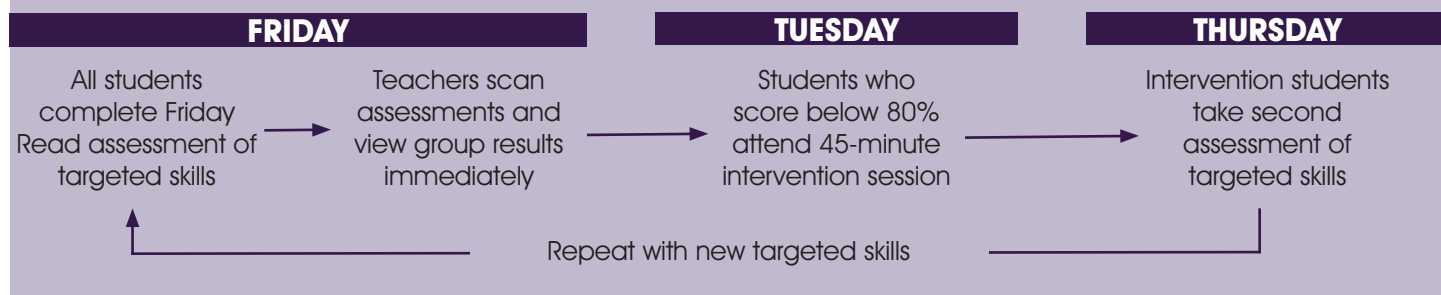
ing conclusions. Teachers of both the Advanced Placement and the regular 11<sup>th</sup>-grade English classes agreed to teach the corresponding content and skills, although teaching methods were left up to the discretion of the instructor.

Every Friday, each class completed a Friday Read assessment (tier one or primary prevention level). Teachers were able to scan the students’ tests using computerized scantron software (Mastery Manager; Goldstar Learning,

ing skills such as finding the main idea and drawing conclusions; pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies; and general test-taking tips via interactive PowerPoint presentations developed by the teachers on the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade intervention team. With assistance from two of those 11<sup>th</sup>-grade English teachers and one special education teacher, students also worked in small groups of three to four on guided practice using the techniques and strategies.

Students already receiving special

### PROGRESS MONITORING & INTERVENTION PROCESS



### PROCEDURE

During a professional development day, the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade English teachers collaborated to devise the structure of the tiered levels of intervention and progress monitoring procedures. They developed the common assessments by choosing appropriate skills-based questions from the state’s released practice assessments and the junior-level English textbook. Each benchmark skill set had two formative or progress monitoring assessments, each with 10 to 15 items, for a total of 12 assessments over a six-week time period. The assessments targeted skills such as reading for detail, identifying the main idea, making inferences, and draw-

ing conclusions. Teachers of both the Advanced Placement and the regular 11<sup>th</sup>-grade English classes agreed to teach the corresponding content and skills, although teaching methods were left up to the discretion of the instructor. Based on that progress-monitoring data, those students who scored below 80% on the Friday Read were then notified of their scores and instructed to attend the intervention sessions on Tuesday and Thursday of the following week.

Each Tuesday, a 45-minute reading intervention session (i.e., tier two or secondary prevention level) occurred during the school-wide seminar period. Students not involved in the interventions could get help from individual teachers, work on group projects, and do homework. In the reading intervention session, the reading specialist delivered direct instruction on read-

education services (tier three or tertiary level) through the learning center and/or those who were enrolled in Read 180 also received individualized instruction in the skills targeted that week within the context of those specialized classes in addition to the Tuesday reading intervention.

On Thursday, the students returned for 30 minutes or less and took the second formative assessment of the targeted skills. If students scored better on this test, the higher score would replace the lower score in the grade book. Throughout the same week, instruction on a new set of skills occurred in the general education classroom, and on Friday, the process would repeat itself.

Thus, some students never attended a reading intervention because they scored 80% or higher on every Friday Read, and other students attended all intervention sessions.

A week before intervention sessions began, all 11th graders were told in detail about the reading intervention process (i.e., the criteria for movement between tiers one and two). English teachers, special educators, and the reading specialist clearly explained to the students that the sessions were designed to help them improve their reading skills, and if they scored high enough (e.g., proficient, advanced, or exemplary) on the state assessment, they would be exempt from their English final exam. Student involvement and awareness at the onset was essential to the success of this intervention program. Parents of all 11th graders were also notified via a letter from the principal that was sent home with the students.

## OUTCOMES

After two rounds of reading interventions, the number of students required to attend tier two went from 77 students to 55, an overall decrease of 22 students. This helped teachers distinguish between students requiring extra instruction with a particular reading skill, and students who simply needed extrinsic motivation to perform at their current, expected level on reading tests. Results also indicated that, with the ex-

ception of those students who had a clearly identified learning disability in reading documented in their IEP, special education students were not more likely than general education students to need the reading intervention. On average, eight of the 18 students with IEPs whom teachers thought might struggle with the Friday Reads actually performed quite well and scored above 80% on the initial formative assessments. The ultimate result of this intervention program was a 10% gain in the preliminary reading scores for the entire junior class on the state reading assessment.

## DISCUSSION

One perceived key to the success of this intervention program was the collaboration among the general education staff, special education staff, the reading specialist, and administration. Teacher leadership was also essential, as was buy-in from the students and parents. Although small in scale, only affecting the 11<sup>th</sup> graders (315 students in a school of 1,500), this intervention program proved effective in generating an overall climate of responsiveness to intervention at the high school level. Next year, the English department plans to expand the Friday Reads to all grade levels, and the math department is formulating a similar intervention for the 10<sup>th</sup> graders prior to the state math assessment.

The preceding example illustrates

one way of implementing RTI in a secondary setting. During the development process, the staff confronted issues that any staff will have to confront: Where should we begin? What characterizes the students who will receive more intense services? On what basis will decisions of services be based? How will progress be monitored? What is the index of students' responsiveness? How will we differentiate among the tiers of services? What happens for those students whose response rate is lower than anticipated? However, in this example, two other important topics were not addressed. What is the role of special education? How is fidelity of implementation monitored? As their implementation matures, the staff will address these questions and likely revisit prior decisions. They have demonstrated a process for collectively problem solving important issues confronting their school and recognize that the full implementation is a goal and a journey for the benefit of all the students.

## REFERENCES

- Goldstar Learning, Inc. (2008). *Mastery Manager* [Software]. Available from Goldstar Learning, Inc.: <http://www.masterymanager.com>.
- Read 180 (2008). [Computer software]. Bloomington, IL: Scholastic, Inc.

### *Document citation:*

Khan, C., & Mellard, D. (2008). *RTI in secondary schools: One high school English department's journey*. [Brochure]. Lawrence, KS: National Center on Response to Intervention.



## NATIONAL CENTER ON RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

Partners: American Institutes for Research, University of Kansas, Vanderbilt University  
Supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.  
Cooperative agreement #H32E070004. Project officers: Grace Duran and Tina Diamond.  
This report is in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

