

Implications for Reading Teachers in Response To Intervention (RTI)

RTI increases the need for reading specialists/literacy coaches. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) focuses on providing more effective instruction by encouraging earlier intervention (though the use of RTI) for students experiencing difficulty learning to read. It also addresses the significant percentage of students—up to 40%, according to the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education—whose reading problems place them in special education classes.

New and Expanded Roles for Reading Teachers

The design, implementation, and evaluation of an RTI approach creates new opportunities and greater need for reading specialists/literacy coaches, while also requiring their active participation in more familiar but expanded roles. **(For more information see “*New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children: A Collection of Fact Sheets*” at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/rti_role_definitions.pdf.)**

Reading specialists/literacy coaches will need to be:

- Open to change in how students are identified for intervention; how interventions are selected, designed, and implemented; how student performance is measured and evaluated; how evaluations are conducted; and how decisions are made
- Members of the observation team when the child’s learning problems involve reading
- Service providers in the RTI process
- Sharing expertise with the other professionals on the team
- Suggesting interventions that are integrally connected with the core reading program used in the classroom
- Willing to adapt a more systemic approach to serving schools, including a workload that reflects less traditional service delivery and more consultation and collaboration in general education classrooms.

Serving Individual Students

Most reading specialists/literacy coaches will be expected to alter their instructional roles within RTI approaches through:

- Providing intensive instruction to struggling readers. Such instruction may be provided either within or outside the students’ classrooms
- Consulting with teachers and parents regarding early intervention activities in the classroom and at home
- Demonstrating and training in use of informal assessment as part of an individual student intervention plan, and assisting staff in interpreting data as part of the on-going decision-making process
- Observing students in the instructional environment in order to help identify appropriate intervention strategies, to identify barriers to intervention, and to collect response to intervention data

Leadership

Reading specialists are often assigned to leadership roles on school teams. Even when not designated as a team leader, the reading specialist often is regarded as a leader in such areas as assessment and home-school collaboration. Most reading specialists/literacy coaches will be expected to alter their leadership roles within RTI approaches through:

- Identifying and analyzing existing literature on evidence-based literacy assessment and instructional approaches
- Developing, leading, and evaluating a schoolwide reading program, K-12
- Identifying systemic patterns of student need (e.g., identifying persistent difficulties among kindergarten and first grade students in basic phonic skills) and working with district personnel to identify appropriate, evidence-based intervention strategies
- Serving as a resource in the area of reading for paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, and the community
- Working collaboratively with other professionals and parents in planning programs to meet the needs of learners
- Ongoing consultation regarding implementation issues as well as regarding individual student needs
- Providing essential leadership for the school's entire literacy program by helping create and supervise a long-term staff development process that supports both the development and implementation of the literacy program over months and years
- Developing and leading effective professional development programs to successfully implement RTI.
 - The RTI requirement to use evidence-based reading research means both beginning and seasoned general and special education. Reading specialists need to be adept with phonemics, phonics, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary, among other skills.

Key Concepts and Benefits of RTI

RTI is a multi-tiered process that provides services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. RTI is a problem-solving approach that allows struggling students to receive effective reading interventions early as an alternative to the IQ discrepancy model used in the past. **(For more information see “*Response to Intervention: NASDSE and CASE White Paper on RTI*” at www.nasdse.org/projects.cfm?pageprojectid=23)**

There is no “one size fits all” model for RTI. The federal government purposely provided few details for the development and implementation of RTI procedures, stating specifically that states and districts should be given the flexibility to establish models that reflect their own community. Clearly, reading specialists will be called on to take a more proactive and flexible approach to sharing reading knowledge with other personnel and to working collaboratively to learn the insights and knowledge of other staff professionals. Reading specialists working in districts that opt to develop an RTI approach can offer tremendous value and expertise at many levels. IRA members can begin the RTI process by reviewing what they are currently doing to monitor student progress and make data-based decisions within a problem-solving framework. IRA

members should share with principals the benefits of an RTI-type approach, and the support offered through IDEA.

Benefits of RTI include:

- Earlier identification of students who have reading difficulties
- Decrease in the number of students referred for special education since placement is based on ability to learn
- Informed and involved parents who are better equipped to support and reinforce academic and behavioral interventions
- Reduction in the overidentification of minority students (**For more information see IRA position statement, “*The Role of Reading Instruction in Addressing the Overrepresentation of Minority Children in Special Education in the United States*” at www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_minorities.html)**
- Promise for closing the achievement gap
- 15 percent of a school’s special education funds can be used to implement the RTI process
- Comprehensive problem-solving approaches by a multidisciplinary intervention team
- Continuous improvement model of assessing, planning, and implementing
- High quality reading instruction in all classrooms based on evidence-based research by:
 - Monitoring and evaluating core reading instruction to determine that it works for most general education students
 - Establishing of reading benchmark norms for school, grade-level and classroom

Core Concepts in RTI include:

- High quality reading instructional and behavioral supports
- Frequent and ongoing assessment of all students
- Data-based documentation for each student
- Early identification of learning and behavioral needs
- Close collaboration among general education teachers, special education personnel, and parents
- Data-driven, shared-decision making on intensity and type of interventions
- Evidence-based reading instruction and interventions delivered by highly qualified teachers
- Continuous progress monitoring of a student’s response to these interventions
- Increased levels of intensity of intervention
- Systemic commitment to locating and employing the necessary resources to ensure that students make progress in the general education curriculum
- Documentation of the components and structure of the RTI process

Professional Development and RTI

Reading specialists are among the best-trained professionals in leading schools to help develop, implement, and evaluate new models of service delivery as well as deliver professional development. Schools should engage teachers in high quality ongoing professional development programs that:

- Focus on what students are to learn and on how to address the different problems students may have in learning the content
- Are differentiated according to need
- Involve teams of teachers learning together
- Are based on analyses of the differences between actual student performance and desired performance

The IDEA law states: "...professional development (which may be provided by entities other than local educational agencies) for teachers and other school staff to enable such personnel to deliver scientifically based academic instruction and behavioral interventions, including scientifically based literacy instruction, and, where appropriate, instruction on the use of adaptive and instructional software; and ...providing educational and behavioral evaluations, services, and supports, including scientifically based literacy instruction." **(For more information see P.L. 108-446, section 613, f, Early Intervention Services <http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html>)**

Funding to Support and Implement RTI

To meet the needs of all students, the educational system must use its collective resources to intervene early and provide appropriate interventions. RTI requires systemic change in allocation of resources when considering personnel workloads. To support these efforts, IDEA 2004 gives more financial flexibility to LEAs. Funds may be used to provide educational and behavioral evaluations, services, and supports. Funds may also be used for professional development for school staff members on evidence- based interventions, including literacy instruction.

- Under the Early Intervening Services (EIS) provisions in the law, to help minimize over-identification and unnecessary referrals, LEAs can use up to 15 % of their federal IDEA funds to provide academic and behavioral services to support prevention and early identification for struggling learners including evidence-based reading instruction. **(For more information see P.L. 108-446. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 at <http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html>)**
- LEAs also have greater flexibility to use up to 50% of any increases that they receive in federal funding for Title I activities. These funds may be used for professional development of non-special education staff as well as for RTI-related activities.

Part D of IDEA offers the following competitive grant opportunities for states and local school districts to provide, among other activities, professional development for principals and other school personnel:

- State Personnel Development Grants
- Personnel Preparation to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities
- Interim Alternative Education Settings, Behavioral Supports, and Systemic School Intervention. **(For more information on grants see The Federal Register at www.ed.gov/news/fedregister/announce/index.html)**

States can also set aside funds from Title V, State Grants for Innovation to help implement RTI.

New And Expanded Roles For Schools Using RTI

To successfully implement an RTI approach, schools should establish high quality reading instruction in all classrooms based on evidence-based research; develop comprehensive multi-tiered interventions to match students with appropriate research-based instruction; and develop comprehensive schoolwide problem-solving approaches. Many schools have already developed sensible, effective intervention programs based on the following principles.

RTI is not owned by any one profession. Therefore, it is not something that happens in special education. Rather, it is an approach for teaching all students and should be driven by general education teachers in the general education classroom. **(For information on models, see, “Reading Teachers Play Key Role In Successful RTI Approaches” at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/RTI_dkr_edit.pdf)**

- Effective models require authentic collaboration among administrators, educators, related services personnel, and parents.
- These roles require fundamental changes in the way general education and special education engage in assessment and intervention activities.

Collaborative multidisciplinary teams must conduct relevant, comprehensive evaluations using qualified personnel, which necessarily will include reading specialists/literacy coaches whose skills remain essential to the determination of a specific learning disability (SLD), as well as to the determination of other disabilities. “The determination of whether a child suspected of having a specific learning disability is a child with a disability must be made by the child’s parents and a team of qualified professionals, which must include:

- The child’s regular teacher; or if the child does not have a regular teacher, a regular classroom teacher qualified to teach a child of his or her age, and
- At least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children, such as a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, or remedial reading teacher.” **(For information see P.L. 108-446, section 614, 1, E, RULE OF CONSTRUCTION)**

Therefore, a schoolwide RTI team should include but is not limited to:

- Classroom teacher
- Certified reading specialist
- Special education teacher (occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech-language pathologist, audiologist, learning disabilities specialist)
- Parents of child
- Principal
- Counselor/Social Worker

As members of the intervention assistance and special education teams, reading specialists play critical roles in the implementation of problem solving and RTI efforts. **(For more information see “New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children: A collection of fact sheets” at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/rti_role_definitions.pdf.)**

System Design for RTI

In an RTI process, schools must develop comprehensive interventions at increasing levels of intensity to match students with appropriate research-based instruction. **(For more information see “*Response to Intervention: NASDSE and CASE White Paper on RTI*” at www.nasdse.org/documents/RtIAnAdministratorsPerspective1-06.pdf).** These include:

- Universal preventive interventions for all students
- Selected rapid response interventions for at risk-students
- Concentrated, high intensity interventions for individual students

RTI can provide teachers with a well-integrated and seamless framework system of instruction and intervention guided by child outcome data.

- RTI is typically implemented by screening students three times a year.
- Performance is compared with established reading benchmark norms for school, grade-level, and classroom.
- Students performing below the desired rate are monitored carefully to see if intensive intervention may be necessary.
- Students well below the criteria are considered at risk for reading problems and are provided with immediate attention such as a small-group intervention.
- By providing additional help to the student in the classroom and monitoring progress on a measure such as word-identification fluency or oral reading fluency, the teacher can identify students who continue to fall behind the expected rate of progress.
- Students for whom special education or some type of specialized intensive intervention is deemed appropriate need:
 - Interventions based on monitored progress and targeted to individual needs
 - Interventions administered by classroom teacher, reading specialist, and other highly qualified teachers
 - Interventions which provide students with additional instruction

Implications for Administrators Using RTI

Successful RTI-type programs rely on the leadership of a strong principal or designated leader who has budgetary power and the ability to bring special educators, Title I educators, reading specialists and general educators to the same table to share information on professional development, children, time, space, money, and curriculum resources.

- Schools must be committed to the belief that all children can learn.
- Schools must provide ongoing professional development and support to maximize the use of school staff members.
- Staff members must be trained in collaborative teaching models.
- Staff members must be trained in teaching strategies to address a variety of learning styles.
- Learning support staff known as “related services personnel” in IDEA and as “pupil services personnel” in NCLB must develop programs and provide direct services. **(For more information see “*New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for***

Schools and Children: A collection of fact sheets” at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/rti_role_definitions.)

- Schools must adapt learning communities to enhance educational success for students.
- Schools must engage families as partners in students’ education.
- Existing resources such as staff, time, and budgets must be realigned.

RTI and Federal Regulations

Two substantive changes were made in IDEA 2004 in the determination of eligibility for special education and related services. **(For more information see Final Regulations, 34 CFR Parts 300 and 301, at <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cregs%2C> or P.L. 108-446, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 at <http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html>)**

- 1.) Local education agencies (LEAs) may use “a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures.”
- 2.) When identifying a disability, LEAs “shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or mathematical reasoning.”
 - The determining factor in deciding eligibility for services shall not be "a lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including in the essential components of reading instruction." Those components include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency.
 - The definition of a specific learning disability “does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.”

This provision is useful in addressing concerns about possible over identification and misidentification of students in need of special education and related services. To measure the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing referrals to special education, annual reporting is required on the number of students receiving early-intervention services as well as the number who subsequently receive special education and related services.

RTI is a component of comprehensive assessment. The legislation is explicit on this score: “The screening of a student by a teacher or specialist to determine appropriate instructional strategies for curriculum implementation shall not be considered to be an evaluation for eligibility for special education and related services.” (P.L. 108-446, section 614, 1, E, RULE OF CONSTRUCTION)

RTI and NCLB

Realizing that RTI will affect many of its members, IRA wishes to support educators in their teaching, curriculum decision-making, professional development, and in meeting the IDEA mandates. RTI, like other innovations in special education such as prereferral interventions, the resource room, mainstreaming, inclusion, and the mandate to provide access to the general curriculum to students with disabilities, holds great promise for the reading field. IDEA 2004 builds upon many of the tenets of NCLB with the potential to improve educational results for all students. An RTI approach promises to close the achievement gap by improving literacy instruction for the benefit of all students.

Just as NCLB does not tell schools precisely how to achieve its goals, the implementation of RTI is meant to be flexible and fluid based on individual student and community needs. The approach does not call for significant change or prohibit traditional practices. Rather, it encourages the adoption of new strategies that promise better student outcomes.

Background on Successful RTI-type Models

Many schools have created a variety of successful programs of early intervention and lowered special education referrals. Ogden Elementary School in Ogden, Kansas is a Title I school that in 1996–1997 had a special education referral rate of 25%. Barb Tierney, a reading specialist who became principal that year, initiated an early intervention approach the following school year that embodies RTI concepts—high expectations, ongoing professional development centered on best practice reading instruction, commingling of funds, and collaboration among the principal, special education, Title I, general education, and the school social worker.

Says former Ogden Elementary special education teacher Pam Russell, “Teachers working collaboratively, kids discussed as individuals, deciding what each child needs—it was great fun.” It was also hard work, but the results were indisputable. The special education referrals dropped first to around 12% and, by the year 2000–2001, plummeted to 9%.

Although many school districts have been using Response to Intervention approaches for years, there is hesitancy by some systems to adopt the formal label “RTI.” Pam Russell, now the Executive Director of Special Education Services for Manhattan-Ogden schools, notes “It is so interesting to me how people react when you give something a name. We say the words and talk about RTI and suddenly they have no idea what it is or even that they ever did it. And they think they have no time to even think about it. I brought up this new term and the special ed staff nearly tarred and feathered me. They felt general ed would never do this. I sent a Power Point presentation from Jim Wright (www.interventioncentral.org) and required all sped staff to read it. Then the response was—oh, yeah, we do this all the time.”

The Manhattan-Ogden district regularly uses RTI at the Student Improvement Team level. Manhattan-Ogden uses RTI as one of the ways to identify Learning Disabilities. Russell notes that Kansas is not headed toward pure RTI for identification. Russell says, “The quality of the RTI process is only as good as the people who are actually implementing the interventions. We

purchased MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) program (www.nwea.org/assessments/map.asp) to get baseline data on all students in reading and math. This has helped tremendously with targeting interventions and data collection for progress.”

Impacting Academics and Behavior

“Special education is not a good place if you don’t belong there,” says one special education director in an East Coast urban school system. The director found that children in general education, who are not learning, improve significantly when brought into the “Child Study” process. Child study is a time for all teachers to meet on the child’s needs and give thorough individual interventions. This particular RTI program, currently under development, will focus on academics and behavior. Their use of Aimsweb (<http://aimsweb.com>) allows teachers to administer probes every week and enter data consistently. This evidence-based evaluation system compares the progress of one student to all in the system. If a child is not making progress a team devises reading interventions, small group work, or what ever intervention is warranted.

This school system also uses a schoolwide positive behavior support system offered by Laura Riffle (Positive Interventions and Effective Strategies www.behaviordocor.org). The system introduces, models, and reinforces positive social behavior. It teaches behavioral expectations, rewards students for positive behavior, and eliminates much of the negative behavior that interferes with learning for all students. In the fall of 2007, after professional development is complete, the RTI academic and behavior pieces will be implemented in five elementary schools where principals have expressed interest.

Ways to Use Funds

In one semirural school district, the special education department used their 15% of IDEA funds to send general education teachers to train with administrators and special education teachers. These funds also covered an “early intervening teacher” who trained school staff on early intervention strategies prior to referral to special education and on how to effectively reach children from different cultures. Some funds were used to purchase an FM amplification system (through Abledata at www.abledata.com) that was successful in increasing children’s attention. Though designed for children with hearing issues the schools found that teachers using the amplification system were better able to hold all children’s attention. When the teacher’s back is turned to the blackboard her voice is still strong and direct and children are better able to filter out extraneous noises.

Challenges in Implementing RTI

Many special education teachers are concerned that an approach like RTI will add non–special education children to their already full roster. Others fear that some children will be misdiagnosed as not needing special education referral when they actually do. Some districts may be concerned that leaving this child in general ed could bring down test scores and endanger the school’s chance of meeting AYP.

Some special education directors may be leery of RTI for fear of lawsuits and are taking a wait and see attitude to see if any law suits are filed. Suits could come from parents who believe their child should have been designated for special education services that were delayed during the RTI process. US ED regulations clearly state that “RTI may not be used to delay a parent’s request for evaluation of their child for eligibility for special education.” (OSEP Part B Regulations Regional Implementation Meetings, <http://idea.ed.gov/archive/events>)

Pam Russell says, “I am very excited about the notion of early intervention for prevention of full evaluations for special education services. Our evaluation teams would be glad to have fewer evaluations. BUT those same teams have expressed great concern about ‘opening the floodgates’ to every child who needs a little more help. The idea that non-SPED students could get some services scares them. They feel they are busy enough with the SPED kids.” She faced those territorial concerns when at Ogden Elementary School in 1997 and decided that as a special education teacher she was glad to add more children to her reading or math groups. “It seems to me that helping those children early would pay off more in the long run. And the results were remarkable!” Her school tallied up fewer discipline problems and significant reading and math progress.

Russell notes that for an RTI system to work, teachers need to trust each other and communicate regularly. “Sometimes Title I reading teachers would be working with special education students and sometimes the special education teachers would be working with Title I students. It's really a territorial thing - my kids and your kids. ‘You can't possibly do things as well as I do and if you say the kid is making progress—well, that must mean you are fudging on the evaluation or something.’ You must have a true team—not just groups of teachers. It takes a lot of work to get the teachers to blend services.”

Another challenge that RTI faces is institutionalizing reform efforts in the school culture so that they remain after initiators retire or move on. Unfortunately, Ogden’s successful collaborative approach was not codified within the school culture. When the principal and some team members moved on, the school drifted back to a more traditional grade-level pull-out system, and special education referrals again climbed.

Examples of Successful RTI-type Programs

El Rancho Unified School District in Pico Rivera, California

(Contact: Arnold Tovar, Director of Special and Alternative Education, 562-942-1500)

Thirty-four percent of El Rancho Unified School District students are Second Language Learners. Barbara Moore-Brown, former director of special and alternative education in the El Rancho school district and Judy Montgomery, professor of special education and literacy at Chapman University in Orange, California, coordinated to create an RTI process for El Rancho. For several years prior to the 2002 RTI implementation, the district’s special education department worked to develop assessments appropriate for this diverse student population.

Formal pre- and post-testing consists of the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE), AGS Publishing (Williams, 2001).

Montgomery noted in an interview for the *ASHA Leader*, "I began to think that we could develop a program that took all the best strategies and deliver intensive services every day — delivering services two or three times a week is not enough to change learning styles."

Montgomery's RTI interventions are based on *Put Reading First* (Armbruster & Osborne, 2001) which consists of nine weeks of one-hour daily instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, vocabulary development, fluency, and text comprehension. They developed 17 activities that guarantee instruction and daily practice in each of the five areas of reading. The RTI program in El Rancho targets fourth and fifth-grade students who could be referred for special education assessment. These students are struggling readers for whom interventions in the general education program have failed.

District general educators, reading teachers, special education resource specialists, along with the speech-language pathologist, are part of the RTI team. At the end of the program, students have received 45 hours of intense, systematic, scientifically based reading instruction in small groups.

Results from the program are impressive. One hundred twenty-three fourth- and fifth-graders who lagged two to three years in reading have demonstrated statistically significant improvement as measured by GRADE, with gains representing more than a year's reading level growth in just nine weeks. These students have also improved on statewide assessments. Most gratifying is that over two years, of the 123 students who participated in the program, only eight, or about 6%, have been identified as special education students.

In December 2004, El Rancho's RTI program was recognized with the California School Boards Association's Golden Bell Award. The principals have been so happy with the program that they requested Moore-Brown and Montgomery to modify it for use in summer school as a whole class format involving reading teachers and general education teachers. The district's Reading First coaches will help conduct the teacher training and assessments for the summer school program.

Moore-Brown notes that it is critical for reading teachers and general education teachers to know that RTI creates greater expectations for them to provide interventions prior to referring students for special education assessments. Reading First Coordinator Roberta Gonzalez adds, "Struggling readers do not become the responsibility of a resource specialist; rather, all teachers of reading draw upon their professional knowledge and skills to ensure that even the most struggling reader receives a quality instructional program that will help him/her succeed. Perhaps most importantly, implementation of the RTI program necessitates a paradigm shift in how reading teachers approach instruction for struggling readers. All too often, there is a tendency to slow down instruction for students that are experiencing difficulty with learning to read. RTI recognizes the importance of maintaining a rigorous instructional pace for these students. By moving through the 17 program activities in an hour, the reading teacher ensures that students remain engaged in sufficient learning experiences to progress in their reading skills and abilities."

Nebraska’s RTI Consortium

<http://rtinebraska.unl.edu/index.html>

The Nebraska RTI Consortium was created based on a request from the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska RTI Ad-Hoc Committee to promote successful use of RTI throughout the state. Under the direction of multiple educational stakeholders (state and regional administrators, school psychologists, special educators, teachers, university personnel, etc.), it provides ongoing leadership and support for Educational Service Units (ESUs) and school districts in the implementation of RTI practices. Specifically, the Consortium has been designed to help:

1. Coordinate and supervise a statewide RTI implementation plan
2. Train ESUs and school districts to deliver high quality support for the implementation of RTI
3. Provide guidelines and support for a quality implementation process for RTI service delivery and eligibility determination
4. Coordinate the analysis and evaluation of statewide RTI data, and
5. Disseminate results from state RTI implementation

See Nebraska’s website for information on their RTI training modules, technical assistance guidelines, and RTI summer training institute.

Ogden Elementary School, Ogden, Kansas

(Contact: Pam Russell, Executive Director Special Education and Student Support Services, 785-587-2000, pamr@manhattan.k12.ks.us)

Ogden Elementary School in Ogden, Kansas, is a Title I school that in 1996–1997 had a special education referral rate of 25%. Barb Tierney, a reading specialist who became principal that year, initiated an early intervention approach the following year that embodies the concepts of RTI. Pam Russell, the special education teacher at the time, recalls the plan they used: “The year began and ended with reading inventories for all children in the school. Children were grouped by reading levels in inclusive multiaged groupings. The special education teacher took charge of the lowest groups of children. The Title I teacher took charge of the next level. The classroom teachers and student teachers took the highest groups. The library aide and paraeducators would help with these groups.” The students had one-hour sessions of small-group learning focusing on specific reading skills, making sure every student was making progress. Groups were fluid and students would move up when they tested ready.

The teachers chose instructional themes that were used across content areas and grade levels. A significant part of Pam Russell’s job as special education teacher was to share with regular education and reading teachers behavioral strategies to help at-risk children be better learners.

Russell said, “We created behavior systems that encouraged positive behaviors. We kept running records in our small reading groups to identify errors and fluency levels of individuals, data collection to determine types of reading errors, and comprehension problems. We noted each child’s topics of interest. Doing this student by student became manageable, not a nightmare. We also tied in writing because we know if kids see it, say it, and write it, it sticks in their brains

better. We made books, stories they wrote themselves, tied to the theme. I really believe our special education numbers were lower because all teachers worked together to help each child develop better social behaviors conducive to learning.”

Barb Tierney, former principal of Ogden Elementary School, shares her experience on initiating the RTI-type process at Ogden: “We followed the State of Kansas’ School Improvement Team plan that required us to involve parents, do reading assessments at the beginning and end of the year, create a comprehensive professional development plan, and set aside collaborative teacher planning time. In addition to pre- and post-testing we did ongoing reading inventories every six weeks. We created a long-range professional development plan that emphasized research based reading instruction and we required all teachers on staff to participate. In addition to specific strategies to implement sound reading principles, teachers learned strategies to deal with discipline problems, encourage parental involvement, and reward success. We also included methods and positive reinforcements to improve not only reading and writing, but general academics, studying and organization, classroom management, and children’s behavior. We were able to combine funds from Title I and other grant resources to pay for professional development and collaborative planning time.”

A sampling of the reading inventories still in use in the Manhattan-Ogden schools includes Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI -II) 2nd through 5th; Metropolitan Achievement Test (3rd grade); Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) 6th through 9th; and CTB/McGraw Hill’s Language Assessment System (LAS) for English language learners.

Pella Community School District, Iowa

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Alarming statistics on how ill prepared at-risk kindergarten children were to learn reading motivated Pella to revamp its reading program to the more encompassing RTI approach. Pella focused on diagnostic interventions to improve students’ reading fluency and meet their comprehension needs. Of special concern were readers who were slightly behind in their development, but rarely qualified to receive assistance until they fell even further behind.

Pella began phasing in its RTI-type Comprehensive Assistance Program in 1999 to diagnose specific reading needs of each elementary student and provide precise, immediate interventions. The Pella school system’s three elementary schools serve about 1000 children in total. All teachers sought to find a way improve reading learning. The program has been fully in place since 2002–2003.

Pella’s program provides diagnostic information on every child each week from the first week of kindergarten through the last week of fifth grade. Interventions address all levels of need from special education through gifted students. It involves direct instruction and many helpers, including community volunteers.

Results have been impressive. Fourth grade reading proficiency levels have risen to 92% on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills from 84.2% prior to 1999. Fluency rates have risen 10 to 20 words per

minute, and early literacy proficiency rates have increased 27%. Special education referrals have dropped.

Pella’s program components:

- *Assessment system:* This is designed to furnish staff with “real-time” data on student progress, allowing staff to place students in the program according to testing results, before students fall significantly behind. Pella assesses students weekly. Their evaluations include phonemic awareness (DIBELS); fluency and accuracy (DIBELS, quarterly probes); phonics (locally developed benchmark assessments); and comprehension (Gates MacGinite, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, locally developed benchmark assessments, Accelerated Reader data, and STAR testing); and vocabulary (Gates MacGinite, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, locally developed benchmark assessments, and STAR testing). Pella uses DIBELS and their own system that stores and analyzes student progress data. Notes Lowell Ernst, Pella’s curriculum coordinator, “Without the access and use of real-time data there is no way to analyze individual student progress at the same time as system effectiveness.”
- *Community and parent involvement:* A “literacy army” of 150 trained volunteers provides reading assistance to individuals and groups of students. Trained pre-service teachers provide small-group literacy instruction. Community members from the hospital to the local media are involved in promoting early literacy. Pella’s Early Literacy Mentoring Association helps make all parents aware of the importance of doing literacy activities with children from birth to age five. The Association presents educational seminars and prepares literacy kits that can be checked out from the public library. Reaching out for community involvement helped secure parent cooperation and volunteers to move the program to greater success. The community buy-in helped Pella overcome typical challenges that included finding and training volunteers to help in “tier 1” interventions; hiring assistants; and instituting new professional development, especially for use of DIBELS and other real-time data collection efforts.
- *Adjustments for reading teachers:* Reading teachers developed and shared with staff strategies to match students’ unique needs. Students are instructed through one-on-one tutoring and small groups within the classroom setting. Reading teachers have increased their attention to data-based decision making and have become accustomed to a variety of people working with their students. All teachers changed their system of delivery by pulling students together with similar needs rather than similar schedules. Notes reading teacher Angie Anthony, “My job is easier because I have more options for serving each student. Having the students grouped according to needs helps me focus on each student and concentrate on quality instruction.”

Pella’s advice to other districts:

Lowell Ernst reports that it is very important to have an effective student data management system to store and access student progress data. “Ours was built locally, but many off-the-shelf products would help as well. An administrative assistant to perform data entry is also advantageous. Training from our Area Education Agency has been essential in learning strategies for supplemental and intensive instruction. Part-time coordinators for our volunteer program and our pre-service teacher program help teachers to spend less time organizing efforts. Sufficient materials and technology for supplemental instruction have been essential.”

Ernst reinforces the advice offered by Pam Russell of Ogden school, “Be certain that everyone shares the mission. RTI cannot happen with the view that those are someone’s kids. You can’t have Title I kids, special education kids, and general education kids. You just have kids and we are responsible for all of them.” The Pella district ensured professional team players by bringing teachers and specialists to student problem-solving meetings. They collaborate to match services to the needs of the students. Pella has “Literacy Day” three times per year to analyze the status of every child in the district and redesign treatment groups to help everyone.

Ernst says, “The use of programs such as Read Naturally, Reading Mastery, and the Early Reading Initiative has shown excellent impact with our students. We are getting to more kids and meeting their needs more appropriately. We have become more sensitive to meeting needs sooner.”

Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, Oakland County, Michigan

(Contact: Susan Matz, Director of Instructional Programs, 248-956-2000, matzs@walledlake.k12.mi.us)

In 2002, to implement Walled Lake's RTI version, the Seamless Support Model, nine Reading Recovery (RR) teachers replaced 28 paraeducators in three Title I schools. These RR teachers are part of a coordinated teaching effort among principals, counselors, general educators, special education teachers, and ESL staff. The school system began replacing the Title I funded paraeducators with RR teachers in 2002–2003. By 2003–2004 the RR teachers were targeting the lowest third of first-grade students. These students have one-on-one sessions every morning, covering all five reading pillars. In the afternoons the RR teachers lead 40-minute small literacy groups composed of children in the next most-in-need tier of readers in grades K–2. Each week during block time the RR teachers work with the kindergarten through second-grade teachers to help plan targeted instruction for all K–2 students.

Susan Matz, Walled Lake's director of instructional programs, notes that the Seamless Support Model redefines special education teachers' roles to include helping general education students, K–5. The line between regular education and special education teachers has been largely erased; they work together and share their students.

Additionally, the Model includes a part-time teacher for each school who leads Soar to Success (a reciprocal teaching program using dialogue involving summarizing, question generating, clarifying, and predicting to improve comprehension) and serves as an additional literacy intervention for third- through fifth-grade students.

The most useful "tools" have been the Developing Readers Assessment, the Developing Writers Assessment, and the use of assessment walls at K–2. A locally developed writing guide called "*Writing Units of Study*" has also provided structure and guidance for teachers by mapping a year long program of study at each grade level. The literacy curriculum is based in part on the components of the Arkansas Comprehensive Literacy Model.

RTI Professional Development in Walled Lake: Model Classroom Project:

Recently, Walled Lake began an initiative to make Readers and Writers Workshop the core of their literacy instruction using a "Model Classroom Project" for professional development. "We think our model combines the best of a traditional coaching approach with a site-based professional development model. Building on the work of Dorn and the Comprehensive Literacy Model, our RR Teacher Leader meets monthly with three 'model' classroom teachers. They co-develop modules around readers' and writers' workshop components and 'practice' the techniques with the coach observing and providing feedback," says Matz.

Once the module is defined, the coach brings other teachers at the grade level to the "model room" for guided observations. She meets with each observation group to debrief and to help the teachers make action plans for their own implementation. Matz states that this method is powerful and effective: "We wish we'd done this five years ago!" She notes, "By spending our dollars on intervention rather than remediation, children are receiving focused instruction when they need it so they are not unnecessarily declared handicapped."

Walled Lake’s advice to schools introducing RTI:

“Attend to improving the quality of classroom early in the process. It should be possible to have approximately 80% of students meeting the standard in a well differentiated classroom program. Teachers need guidance and support in how to structure their classrooms to meet a variety of needs and clear direction on content expectations and best instructional strategies. ...Our Reading Recovery staff has been the backbone of the intervention process along with the general education time that some learning resource (special education teachers) are provided through RTI,” notes Matz.

“We involved our special education director and ESL coordinator in the earliest stages of the Title I RTI restructuring. They both sit on our district steering committee and are committed to the principles of RTI. We have made sure that all balanced literacy professional development has included all staff (general education and special education and ESL) so we can build a common language of assessment and best practices in literacy instruction. We continue to work toward the special and general education staff using and sharing the same assessment information and avoiding use of fragmented literacy methods or materials that focus on isolated skill remediation or those based on conflicting models of literacy acquisition. In a district our size, communication is always a challenge and despite our best efforts to assure special education staff this initiative is not about eliminating positions, we still face some pockets of misunderstanding and opposition. We continue to work the problem.”

When asked if Walled Lake would have done anything differently after five years of RTI experience, Matz responded: “We would have been much more focused on staff development for teachers and much more directive about using ‘universal screening’ data and the assessment wall concept at all grade levels. We are five years into our RTI journey and only in the last year identified how important that building wide analysis of all test results can be. Our work with professional Learning Communities helped us to understand the power of looking at all students at all grade levels two to three times each year. Using universal screening data allows grade level teams to identify struggling students quickly and intervene early. Frequent progress monitoring also helps us to change interventions more flexibly.”

Positive academic results and teacher feedback during the transitional year bolstered Walled Lake’s resolve to continue this effort. With the program now fully functioning, the results are good. By every measure (including the California Achievement Test and the state assessments) students who had the new Seamless Support Model (including full implementation of Reading Recovery) are referred less frequently than students who had the prior Title I paraprofessional intervention. Teacher feedback is also positive. Second-grade teachers immediately commented that it was amazing how much more advanced their incoming students were compared to previous years.

Prior to this Seamless Support Model version of RTI, Walled Lake’s three Title I schools had a special education referral rate around 10–15 students per year per school. In 2003–2004 the special education referrals ranged from 0–3 students. More importantly, with the new Seamless Support Model, each school was able to reclassify many learning disabled children as regular education students. Between 2002 and 2006 the percentage of students classified as special

education students dropped in each of the three Title I schools by 28%, 15%, and 30%, respectively.

Matz concludes, “We are able to intervene earlier and more effectively. Overall achievement in reading and writing in our Title I schools is increasing. We've had fewer early grade referrals to special education.”

Resources for Implications for Reading Teachers in Response To Intervention (RTI)

From the International Reading Association:

(for complete IRA resources see www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_rti_library.html)

“New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children: A collection of fact sheets” In February 2006, IRA convened a group from the special education and regular education associations to craft a set of fact sheets on the roles of the various professionals and parents who are involved in implementing RTI procedures. The goal of that effort was not to create a consensus document but a collective set of papers that represent each organization’s distinctive constituency and viewpoint. Available at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/rti_role_definitions.pdf.

Paper on RTI models

“Reading Teachers Play Key Role In Successful RTI Approaches”

A number of U.S. schools provided successful intervention models that Congress drew upon in shaping the RTI provisions of IDEA. Available at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/IDEA_RTI_teachers_role.pdf.

Position Statement

“The Role of Reading Instruction in Addressing the Overrepresentation of Minority Children in Special Education in the United States” The issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs is of special concern. Reading difficulties and poor quality instruction in schools that have a high proportion of minority students may be a factor in referral and placement decisions. Another factor may be that teachers, unfamiliar with home cultures and language and background experiences, make judgments about children’s achievement based on inappropriate criteria. This paper discusses the importance of professional collaborations and makes recommendations for policymakers, teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, and parents. Available at www.reading.org/downloads/resources/IDEA_RTI_teachers_role.pdf.

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