

Response to Intervention in Secondary Schools: Is It on Your Radar Screen?

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If you are a secondary educator or a parent of a teenager and you have heard of Response to Intervention (RTI), it has likely been in reference to activities in early elementary school, not in your middle, junior, or high school. There are exceptions, of course; you might be in the throes of figuring out how to implement it at your school. However, up to this point, the RTI focus has been on the primary grades. Across the country, educators are beginning to expand RTI to secondary schools; so, whether or not your school is presently implementing RTI, you will want to have it on your radar screen. The purpose of this article is to provide an orientation to RTI in secondary settings, rather than a detailed description of RTI. For in-depth descriptions, examples, and research about RTI, visit the [Learn About RTI section](#).

The following definition of RTI sets the stage:

The RTI process is a multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning at increasing levels of intensity. The progress students make at each stage of intervention is closely monitored. Results of this monitoring are used to make decisions about the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education, or both. (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006, p. 1)

This article is structured around the following questions:

- How does the rationale for RTI relate to secondary education?
- What myths have to be dispelled to make RTI viable at secondary levels?
- What opportunities does RTI afford middle, junior, and high schools?
- What challenges exist with RTI at secondary levels?
- What questions should you be asking?

How Does the Rationale for RTI Relate to Secondary Education?

RTI began as a new way to look at learning disabilities (LD) from two standpoints: a) preventing students who struggle with reading from being labeled as students with disabilities when the difficulties they are facing could be resolved by different or more intense instruction and b) providing an alternative to discrepancy formulas (achievement in comparison to IQ) for identifying students as having LD who instead need "specialized instruction" as required by federal law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 [IDEA 2004]). In the latter case, the notion is that students who continue to have difficulty learning even after having received scientifically based instruction and supplemental intervention may have LD. (We should note that although reading problems provided the

impetus for creating RTI approaches, in many places the approach has been expanded to include other academic and behavioral problems.)

It might seem odd to refer to *prevention* in secondary education, because by the time some students get to middle school, they already have a history of academic failure that often worsens in high school. *Prevention* has been a term typically used to address activities with younger children at risk for school failure. However, there are different ways to think about prevention with adolescents. One way is with respect to literacy. Because literacy is a key to academic success in secondary settings, difficulty in this area bodes ill for students learning academic subjects. By focusing on proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, educators can help students access content, thereby avoiding more global school failure.

Another way to think about prevention relates to avoidance of negative consequences of poor academic achievement, including failure to earn a diploma and dropping out of school. Other undesirable outcomes have more to do with personal and social consequences, such as low self-esteem, alienation, and antisocial behavior, including criminal activity. When construed in these ways, prevention, indeed, is germane to the education of adolescents.

What about the second aspect of RTI—the alternative to discrepancy formulas for identifying students as having LD? Partly because of the long-standing use of discrepancy formulas in schools, educators are likely to encounter struggling students in middle, junior, and high schools who have fallen through the cracks, that is, students who did not meet discrepancy criteria for LD identification in elementary school and who are now having serious problems in a secondary setting. In an RTI approach, such students who need more than good, scientifically based instruction might be sufficiently assisted with interventions in general education and not need special education. However, in the event that this is not enough, data documenting lack of sufficient progress in interventions outside of special education (i.e., lack of responsiveness to intervention) would provide evidence along with other evaluation data to support identification of such students as having LD.

In fact, this aspect of RTI is especially important at the secondary levels. Especially if students have had some help over the years, they may not evidence the kind of discrepancy needed for traditional eligibility requirements. A frustrating circumstance frequently reported by parents is that in an effort to help their children succeed, they seek outside tutoring that may insufficiently ameliorate academic problems but may be just effective enough to prevent them from meeting discrepancy eligibility criteria for special education.

What Myths Have to Be Dispelled to Make RTI Viable at Secondary Levels?

Middle, junior, and high schools are very different places from elementary schools and, in fact, are different from each other. To facilitate the development of beliefs, values, and a culture supporting RTI adoption, common myths have to be dispelled. Several myths related to adolescent literacy discussed by Ehren, Lenz, and Deshler (2004) can be adapted to the larger context of RTI:

Myth #1: It is fruitless to spend time and money on struggling adolescents because they have passed the point at which instruction or intervention can make a real difference.

Secondary educators may be less than enthusiastic about RTI implementation because they may be pessimistic about what can be accomplished with older students. They may think that struggling adolescents are beyond help and that significant problems, especially with literacy, should have been taken care of in elementary school. Surely, we would all love to see problems identified and ameliorated earlier than middle, junior, or high school. However, RTI at the elementary level is just now being implemented, often inconsistently, across the country, so it should not be surprising to find students in secondary schools who are struggling with literacy. Not only would it be unconscionable to give up on older students, but it would also be ill-informed. Evidence exists that intervention with them can be effective. (For example, see O'Connor & Bell, 2004; Scammacca, et al., 2007; Schumaker & Deshler, 1992; Vaughn, Klingner, & Bryant, 2001).

Myth #2: Instruction that works with young children will be equally effective for older students.

For secondary schools charting an RTI course, it would be a mistake to import wholesale the models, programs, and techniques from elementary school. We should not assume that instruction validated at the elementary school level will be effective in middle, junior, and high schools. For example, although we have learned much in recent years about emergent literacy intervention with young children, the same practices may or may not be effective with older students at beginning literacy levels. The unique learner and setting characteristics have to be considered in designing appropriate assessment and instructional approaches at secondary levels. Adolescents are not just bigger primary grade children, even though they may be reading at similar levels. Furthermore, middle, junior, and high schools are far different organizations from elementary schools; therefore, programs have to be tailored to those settings.

Myth #3: Literacy is not the job of secondary educators.

Although secondary-level RTI approaches may expand beyond a literacy focus, as has been the trend at the elementary level, no doubt literacy will continue to be a linchpin. This would make sense, because content mastery at the secondary level depends so much on literacy proficiency. A sticking point, however, is that secondary educators do not always see literacy as their role and often express the opinion that literacy should have been taught by elementary level teachers. An additional factor is that content literacy may not have been a part of many teachers' college preparation programs.

Secondary teachers have to recognize and accept their roles with literacy for all students, not just those who struggle; connections must be made between content mastery and content literacy. Furthermore, administrators need to promote a shared responsibility for academic achievement with literacy roots as a school-wide mission and foster a systematic approach to addressing student needs.

Myth #4: Little can be done for students who are not motivated to engage in learning.

It is certainly true that adolescents unmotivated to learn in school will not succeed. It is not true that nothing can be done about it. Motivation involves a complex set of issues that are not our focus here. (For

more information on this subject, see Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2005; Moje, 2006; Pajares & Urdan, 2005). Suffice it to say at this point, with respect to implementing RTI, that meeting students' individual learning needs can provide a boost that struggling adolescents need to persist in their efforts. Unmotivated, unsuccessful adolescents labeled as "lazy" may put forth greater effort if they are getting the help they need. Also, by participating in their own progress monitoring, they can track their own gains and find additional motivation in doing so.

What Opportunities Does RTI Afford Middle, Junior, and High Schools?

Educators who have seen school initiatives come and go can become jaded about "one more new thing" and may think of RTI in that light. On the other hand, they may think about the current success rates of all the students in their schools and consider whether RTI might hold some promise for addressing the challenges they face in educating adolescents.

Teachers are under enormous pressure to have students meet state standards in specific content areas. In an RTI context, focus on scientifically based instruction means that teachers will be encouraged to examine their teaching practices and to differentiate instruction to enhance student learning. Such attention on good, universal instruction will enhance teachers' success in helping students meet standards.

Students who struggle with content, especially those who cannot read the textbooks and other learning materials, may need more help than classroom teachers can give. An RTI approach can address in substantive ways the literacy problems inhibiting student success without overburdening content area teachers in the remediation of fundamental literacy skills. Different interventions would be available in a tiered RTI approach. For example if a student is far below grade level in reading, an intensive reading class, taught by a reading specialist may be available.

It has been a common practice in secondary schools to deliver the help that struggling students need by trying to make them eligible for special education programs. Not only is this solution more costly, but it also involves labeling an adolescent as a student with a disability, which he or she may not be. Not all students who need help will wind up qualifying for special education services, leaving many without assistance unless other options are available. When large numbers of students in a school are struggling, administrators must worry about whether the school will meet accountability requirements for adequate yearly progress. With RTI, schools will have a mechanism for helping students make the expected amount of progress. Furthermore, if students do need special education, they will not fail to qualify for services because they do not meet discrepancy criteria.

An additional opportunity is that an RTI approach implemented well may provide a systematic way for secondary schools to address the needs of all the students who come through their doors. Rather than depend on individual teachers or isolated programs, RTI will involve a coordinated effort across faculty. It provides a framework within which resources can be used wisely to provide student support and increase teachers' perception of their efficacy. RTI deals with increasingly intensive interventions for students—no one teacher or group of teachers is solely responsible. Implementation of a tiered approach to instruction

and intervention means that a school acknowledges that one size does not fit all and that data can be used to make decisions about who needs what, how much, and when.

What Challenges Exist with RTI at Secondary Levels?

Many of the same challenges faced at the elementary level will also be faced at the secondary level. What increases the challenge at the secondary level is the complexity of the organization and the nightmare of scheduling, especially in high schools. The definition of tiers is an issue—who, what, how, and for how long? How intensive should the third tier be before it can be considered "specialized" and, therefore, more appropriately a special education service?

Developing structures to deliver intervention within the framework of middle, junior, and high school in ways that are palatable to adolescents can be difficult. For example, the one-on-one tutorial approach used in elementary schools during the school day may be disruptive to the operation of a typical middle or high school and may also be met with resistance from adolescents who would prefer not to be singled out. Other structures, such as a class within a class, a lab, before- or after-school programs, special elective courses, and co-teaching, may be considered.

Also, it is difficult (although not impossible) for secondary schools to promote flexible movement across tiers within a semester course schedule. Then, too, in high school there is the issue of credits; students must be sure to take the courses they need to earn a diploma. If a student needs substantial intervention, he or she may not be able to meet graduation requirements in the 4 years typically allotted for high school.

What Questions Should You Be Asking?

As you contemplate RTI at your school, the following questions may help to frame the conversation, along with some key responses to look for as positive signs of readiness to engage in an RTI initiative:

Question	Answer "Look Fors"
Do we believe that all students can learn?	<p>Teachers have high expectations for ALL students.</p> <p>Teachers describe differentiated instruction to meet the needs of learners in their classes.</p> <p>"Laziness" is not frequently offered as an explanation of poor performance.</p>
Is our school committed to scientifically based instruction?	<p>Programs/techniques used are based on research with adolescents.</p> <p>Instruction is differentiated for students.</p>

	<p>A system for checking fidelity of instruction exists.</p> <p>Assessment data are gathered and reviewed on a regular basis.</p> <p>Classroom instruction changes as a result of data analysis.</p> <p>Programs/classes are structured to meet the needs noted in assessment.</p> <p>Students participate in different programs/classes based on assessment results.</p>
<p>Do we have a school wide approach to literacy?</p>	<p>Literacy assessment data are gathered on at least an annual basis.</p> <p>For students experiencing reading difficulty, problems in comprehension, fluency and word recognition are identified.</p> <p>The school improvement plan specifically addresses literacy.</p> <p>Each teacher can explain her role with literacy.</p> <p>Teachers are supported with high quality professional development that advances literacy in the content areas.</p> <p>We offer a variety of services in varying degrees of intensity to address literacy needs.</p> <p>When we address student literacy needs we differentiate, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension problems.</p>
<p>Who is involved in RTI at our school?</p>	<p>RTI leaders are from across general and special education.</p> <p>Speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, reading specialists and literacy coaches are centrally involved.</p> <p>All educators can explain the school's approach to RTI, as well as the rationale.</p> <p>Parents understand their children's involvement in RTI at the school.</p>

	School level administrators are actively engaged in leading the effort and providing necessary resources.
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Conclusion

It would be wonderful to hope that as RTI approaches are implemented more consistently at elementary (and in fact preschool) levels, we will see increasingly less failure at secondary levels. It would be foolhardy to assume, however, that because there is a focus on RTI at the elementary level, there is no need to attend to it in middle, junior, and high schools. Therefore, it is a good idea for educators and parents to keep RTI on their radar screens and to be oriented toward the following:

1. Explain how the rationale of RTI relates to secondary education.
2. Be prepared to dispel myths that would thwart RTI implementation.
3. Be encouraged by the opportunities RTI presents in secondary settings.
4. Be cognizant of, but undaunted by, the challenges of implementing RTI in middle, junior, and high schools.
5. Be prepared to ask key questions with an ear tuned to positive responses.

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