

Response to Intervention: A Transformational Approach

Response to Intervention (RTI) offers support to all students who need it by focusing assistance on them without labeling them. Using an effective RTI approach is a powerful way to transform how we address student needs in today's schools.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

The work of transforming America's public schools is underway. The goal is to make every school a center of excellence so that all students can gain the skills and education they need to survive and thrive in the 21st century. One promising initiative with the potential to truly transform teaching and learning is an approach called Response to Intervention, or RTI, for short.

What is RTI?

RTI is a schoolwide, multi-step approach to providing services to struggling students. Teachers provide supplementary instruction, supports, and academic or behavioral interventions at increasing levels of intensity. They also monitor the progress students make at each intervention level and use the assessment results to decide whether the students need additional instruction or intervention. This whole school, multi-tiered problem-solving approach to instruction relies on quality core instruction in the general education classroom.

RTI focuses on regularly measuring progress and helping students achieve benchmarks. In the past, the only way some districts could provide extra academic or behavioral support was through special education services. Using an RTI framework, not only do students with disabilities and those with other special needs get the services they need, but so do other students who are struggling but may not qualify for special education services.

The bottom line: RTI is an approach that builds on best practices, uses scarce resources efficiently, and represents systemic—not piecemeal—reform.

A general education initiative

NEA views RTI as a general education—rather than a special education—initiative, even though it derives its impetus from the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In fact, RTI depends on the entire school community for successful implementation.

Many educators see RTI as a *framework* for improving student academic and social achievement. RTI can be considered a kind of education triage. General educators can examine current practices and determine how best to change their strategies to improve student outcomes. Students don't fall further behind or fall through the cracks. They get immediate access to small-group instruction targeted to whatever learning gap has been identified—without being isolated from ongoing classroom instruction. And, once those students are caught up and no longer need extra support, that extra support is available to other students who might need it. No labels. No long process.

Essential components

There are different RTI models but they all have several components in common: using tiers of intervention (usually three) for struggling students, relying on evidence-based instruction and interventions, using problem solving to match interventions to student needs, and monitoring students regularly to determine if they are progressing as they should academically and/or behaviorally.

Successful implementation of RTI depends on several fundamental components:

- effective core instruction
- universal screening of student academic skill levels and behavior

- decision making based upon continuous monitoring of student performance against benchmarks or student outcome expectations
- multiple tiers of increasingly intense evidence-based interventions

Effective core instruction: Based upon the premise that the core instruction is effective and evidence-based, RTI becomes a transformational process. School leaders use RTI as an opportunity to assess the goals, curriculum, and instructional practices used in *all* classrooms for *all* students. To do this, a team of classroom teachers and specialists systematically, grade by grade, analyze whether the curriculum and instructional methodologies are research-based and effective. If schools or districts skip this in-depth analysis and instead jump to making decisions about what interventions to provide to struggling students, they miss a critical learning opportunity. By first focusing on the general education curriculum and instruction, educators can be more reflective about their effectiveness and enhance their own practice at every level.

Universal screening: Educators use informal screening all the time to identify those students who need additional support, but an effective RTI model depends on universal screening. Used with student progress monitoring, universal screening tools help identify students who need *preventative* intervention.

Universal screening tools vary based on age and grade level, but one thing is constant—they are administered to all students. That’s why they’re called *universal*. These tools are different from the formal assessments or evaluations conducted to determine if individual students need special-education services. Universal screening requires less time and is therefore less comprehensive than special-education evaluations.

Continuous monitoring of student performance: In considering whether to incorporate RTI into educational programs, educators need to examine how well they already use data to make instructional decisions for student improvement and how well current services for struggling students are coordinated and integrated. Through the frequent progress monitoring, educators can more easily recognize students who are struggling and adjust

instructional programs to help them get on track academically or behaviorally.

Multiple tiers of increasingly intensive interventions:

Procedures must exist for tier-based resource allocation and documentation to ensure each student receives the level or intensity of needed support. Interventions must be consistently implemented in a way that is aligned with their intent and research-based design. Recommended interventions must be specified, and that means the steps and skills to implement RTI must be standardized.

In a well-defined RTI problem-solving process, educators take these steps:

1. **Problem definition:** Define the problem or skill that is lacking by using student data to determine the student’s current level of performance.
2. **Problem analysis:** Validate the problem, identify variables that contribute to it, develop a hypothesis, and develop predictions and/or goals along with a timeline for student progress.
3. **Development of specific instruction or interventions:** Develop and implement specific instruction or interventions for verified needs. This includes monitoring student progress.
4. **Evaluation:** Analyze frequently collected data to determine the student’s response to the instruction or intervention.

Laying the groundwork

Implementing RTI successfully in a district requires a strong foundation to support the process. At a minimum, districts must be able to manage complex change, build capacity with stakeholders, and provide professional development to school staff.

For RTI to be accepted as a general education initiative, the superintendent and school board must signal this as a priority. Two important first steps include creating a district leadership team on RTI and including RTI in the district’s strategic plan.

For RTI to be most effective, districts must first focus on assessing how well instruction is provided to all students and then how well it meets the needs of subgroups of students,

such as English language learners or students with disabilities. Getting support from parents and community members is important too. Districts should assess their knowledge of RTI and find ways to boost interest and support. Each school must examine its student population, achievement data, and staffing to determine how to implement RTI effectively.

Professional development should provide teachers and staff with skills and knowledge on evolving best practices to implement the RTI process. School teams should identify specific topics for professional development that apply to their particular needs, such as progress monitoring, effective instruction, differentiating instruction, parent engagement, and/or schoolwide behavior supports. Pre-service coursework should address issues such as universal screening, curriculum analysis, data collection and interpretation, using data for instructional decision making, evidence-based interventions, etc.

There are challenges to preparing staff to incorporate RTI into their practice. It takes extensive, ongoing professional development, as well as a strong mentoring or coaching program. It also takes time and money to create the essential data systems that will be used to inform instructional practice. Other potential challenges include difficulty in obtaining reliable data, the challenge of sustaining the program over time, and the shortage of special-needs personnel.

Support is needed at all levels

The following supports will help facilitate effective implementation of RTI:

- **At the federal level:** The U.S. Department of Education should 1) develop policy initiatives and clear guidance, 2) offer funding for data systems and professional development, 3) require teacher training programs to include RTI, and 4) coordinate RTI with common standards.
- **At the state level:** State departments of education should 1) establish a state stakeholder leadership team that includes representation from the Association, key administrator and related service professional organizations, and parent/family groups, 2) provide resources and technical assistance, and 3) offer high quality professional development.

- **At the district level:** Boards of education, superintendents, community leaders, local Association leaders, and parents and families should support the process by 1) learning about RTI and its potential, 2) including RTI in district strategic plans, 3) establishing a cross-stakeholder district-level leadership team, and 4) providing resources for universal screening tools, data systems, team planning, curriculum adaptation, interventions, and professional development.
- **At the school level:** The principal plays a key role, along with union and teacher leaders, instructional coaches, administrators, data analysts, specialists, and support staff in 1) building consensus around RTI implementation, 2) engaging school staff and parent/family representatives, 3) integrating RTI with the school mission and vision, 4) systematically evaluating the adequacy of the core curriculum and instruction, 5) determining goals and procedures, 6) identifying tools, resources, and supports for effective implementation, 7) analyzing and resolving any impact on workload or role responsibilities, 8) organizing resources matched to student needs, 9) defining professional development needs, and 10) evaluating success.

NEA supports effective RTI

NEA is playing a leading role in helping educators obtain the knowledge, skills, and support needed to implement RTI. In the fall of 2008, the Association sponsored a national symposium on RTI in conjunction with the RTI Action Network. NEA has created strong partnerships with federally funded projects, such as the National Center on RTI and the IDEA Partnership. Also, NEA has developed a rich RTI Professional Development Module available online (summer 2010) through the NEA Academy.

The Association offers sessions on RTI at national and state affiliate conferences, and the NEA IDEA Resource Cadre provides workshops on RTI to members across the nation.

To advance effective RTI implementation, NEA offers these recommendations:

- **Higher education:** Promote higher education policy changes that incorporate knowledge and skill preparation related to RTI in pre-service and professional development programs. For example:

- The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) should review whether teacher training requirements include the skills and knowledge that allow new teachers to engage in RTI initiatives.
- Higher education institutions and school districts should develop collaborative accredited programs to provide teacher candidates with RTI experience.
- **Funding:** Advocate for federal and state funding for professional development on RTI for all educators. For example:
 - The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides an opportunity to increase funding for professional development related to RTI's key components, such as student progress monitoring, collaborative problem solving, and implementing schoolwide initiatives.
 - States should include RTI in competitive professional development grants available to districts and schools.
- **State level collaboration:** Encourage partnerships between NEA state affiliates, state departments of education, and the state affiliates of other national organizations (e.g., NAESP, AASA). For example:
 - Cross-stakeholder state RTI leadership teams should include all key stakeholders, including NEA state affiliates, to help craft collaborative state initiatives for successful implementation of RTI.

Educators who work in districts and states that are successfully implementing RTI are finding that universal screening and early intervention are powerful ways to address student needs. The focus changes from defining student deficiencies to determining how to make the whole system as effective as possible. In other words, instead of asking: "What's wrong with this student?" the question instead becomes: "How can we support the learning of all students, no matter what barriers may exist for them?" This is how RTI, if implemented well, has the power to become transformative.

References

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- Ralabate, P. (August 2009). *RTI: A Transformative General Education Initiative*, from the Council for Exceptional Children blog on RTI, <http://cecblog.typepad.com/rti/2009/08/rti-a-transformative-general-education-initiative.html>

Resources

IDEA Partnership RTI Collection is a set of presentations created by the IDEA Partnership, a federally funded project of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) that is housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

www.ideapartnership.org

National Center on Response to Intervention is a federal technical assistance center funded by OSEP and housed at the American Institutes for Research.

www.RTI4success.org

RTI Action Network is a partnership project of the National Center on Learning Disabilities funded by the Cisco Foundation.

www.RTINetwork.org

