

Implementing Response to Intervention (RTI): Considerations for Practitioners

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Introduction

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a schoolwide approach to teaching and learning that combines best practice instruction with a tiered system of remedial interventions for children who need additional help in learning. Why should states and districts focus their attention on RTI at this time? One reason is its promise for helping them reach the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's goal of all students being proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. In addition, when districts and schools use an RTI model to determine whether a student has a learning disability and needs special education services, they are addressing the guidelines in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 (AutoSkill, 2006). More important, RTI provides a mechanism for special and general education staff to work together in ways that increase the accuracy of special education referrals and the number of students who are successful in the general education curriculum (Witt, 2006).

Despite its positive effects, implementing RTI often poses a number of challenges. This brief article will provide background about the attributes of RTI initiatives, discuss changes required in policy and practice as we move toward RTI implementation, and offer guidance regarding how school leaders can manage the effects of the changes that RTI brings to the different levels of the public school system and the stakeholders involved in the changes.

Attributes of RTI

The phrase *Response to Intervention* stems from the premise that successful teaching (defined as learning) depends on close observation of the student's response to the tiered interventions integral to RTI and the subsequent development of similar additional interventions as needed. Frequent formative assessments (also known as progress monitoring) serve as the foundation for successful RTI programs because they enable educators to carefully measure a child's success in mastering the NCLB-specified standards-based learning goals. Knowing whether a child is on track to demonstrate success is a key attribute of RTI because this information allows instructors to develop effective, personalized, instructional, and remediation strategies.

RTI requires a joint effort between general and special education. In many schools, such collaboration requires educators to adopt new ways of thinking, collaborating, and acting together. It also may mean that educators need to assume new identities based not on their job descriptions or funding source for their positions, but rather on the roles they will play in helping each individual child meet the standards set in NCLB requirements. In sum, RTI "done right" requires people to change, sometimes in significant ways. Schools that want to ensure the success of their RTI efforts pay attention to what has been learned about organizational and personal change.

What the Literature and Educational Research Tell Us About Organizational and Personal Change

Many observers of organizational change have drawn distinctions between differing types and degrees, or magnitudes, of change. Researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) have devised strategies for analyzing a change based on its implications and impact on stakeholders (Waters, Marzano, & Nulty, 2003). These strategies guide leaders in determining the magnitude of change and help them understand which leadership responsibilities to emphasize, given their diagnosis, if they want to increase the effectiveness of their change initiatives. Under McREL’s criteria for determining magnitude of change, it appears that RTI would present second-order change implications for most stakeholders. Consider the criteria included in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of First- and Second-Order Changes

First-Order Change	Second-Order Change
• An extension of the past	• A break with the past
• Within existing paradigms	• Outside of existing paradigms
• Consistent with prevailing values and norms	• Conflicted with prevailing values and norms
• Incremental	• Complex
• Implemented with existing skills and knowledge	• Requires new skills and knowledge
• Implemented by experts	• Implemented by stakeholders

Source: Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2003)

Moving toward a more unified approach to teaching and learning might seem to be a straightforward shift in emphasis that easily could be taught, designed, and implemented. However, it would be easy to underestimate the magnitude of this kind of change and thus employ less effective leadership strategies. As we examine the nature of change involved in moving toward RTI, keep in mind these criteria regarding first- and second-order change.

Most Significant Changes Involved in Moving Toward RTI

To understand the challenges involved in successfully implementing RTI initiatives, it is helpful to examine the major areas of policy and practice that are affected by RTI at the state, district, and school levels. Regardless of the level of the system, an organization that chooses to implement RTI will become involved in change in several ways. Policy changes that promote RTI initiatives will be significant, but the most difficult changes will involve incorporating the new policies into the practice of stakeholders. Once stakeholders are required to learn new skills and knowledge and confront new values, the change begins to take on second-order implications.

Changes at the State and District Levels

As Witt (2006) notes, implementing RTI will take states through four phases: 1) readiness, 2) training, 3) implementation tools and procedures, and 4) policy and procedures. In the readiness phase, states will need to consider the extent to which they are ready to undertake a statewide RTI initiative. Can they articulate how RTI is related to other programs such as Reading First? Do they have strategies for building awareness and consensus about the state RTI plan? Are they prepared to deal with the resistance that might exist among advocates of the discrepancy model? A change of this magnitude will require new learning. During the training phase, the state will need to provide awareness training for teachers and then follow-up, job-embedded training for an extended period of time that allows teachers to understand RTI and all of its components at a deep level. Training should extend to preservice teachers as well and might mean that the state needs to establish new relationships with institutions of higher education. To ensure implementation of RTI, in Phase 3 the state will need to provide tools and materials that will help schools and districts screen students, monitor student progress, select and implement interventions, and manage data. During Phase 4, as implementation progresses and final regulations are being developed, states will need to develop or revise policies that provide guidance about screening cut points, selection of interventions, fidelity of implementation, movement through tiers of intervention, eligibility determination, and the timeline and sequence of procedures.

Implementing RTI as a state or district initiative has other implications as well. In terms of policy and funding, regular education, special education (e.g., IDEA), and compensatory education (e.g., Title I, bilingual) are, for the most part, funded through different revenue streams; have different policies, rules, and regulations; and often are managed through different and often isolated structures (commonly termed *silos*) within the same organization, no matter what the level. In general, state education agencies (SEAs) and local school agencies (LEAs) fund and manage regular education while the federal government funds (and, more importantly, regulates) special education and compensatory programs. Each entity and program likely has developed its own culture or way of doing things, which may include working in isolation toward partial or limited ends.

The successful implementation of RTI at the state and district levels may require combining funding streams from special and general education sources, reorganizing working units and departments within SEAs and LEAs, and promoting closer working relationships between formerly separate work groups. Each of these implementation strategies will affect the working culture that currently exists in the department or district. Because the strategies involve change in the culture of the organization, the change most likely will have second-order implications and will need to be managed with care and attention.

Changes at the School Level

Traditional special education disability categories and assignments become less important in schools using RTI. Except for the small number (usually fewer than 2 percent) of severely disabled students who are exempted from NCLB-mandated state tests, all students—no matter their disability status—are held to the same learning standard. In schools that employ RTI, the

specific reasons that students fail to learn are of interest primarily as a lens for considering differentiated instructional strategies.

Consequently, the success of RTI (and, ultimately, all students) depends on a unified approach to teaching and learning supported by everyone in the school. Classroom teachers are held responsible for the learning (as defined by state standards and measured by state tests) of all students, not just those regarded as normal or typical. And special educators must use their skills in adapting instruction to meet the learning goals set forth in the regular education curriculum. Under RTI, there is much less emphasis on program entry requirements and the remediation of specific disabilities and much greater emphasis on finding the right pathways for students to learn. Principals and teacher leaders will need to find ways to redefine job descriptions and develop collaborative methods for analyzing problems and finding solutions. In addition, they will need to establish and maintain accountability systems that will ensure the implementation and continuity of these changes.

Successfully implementing RTI at the school level also might require teachers to interact in different ways with parents. The National Center for Learning Disabilities provides *Parent Advocacy Brief: A Parent's Guide to Response-to-Intervention* (Cortiella, 2006), which explains RTI and includes a set of questions parents should ask about RTI. Available at http://www.nclld.org/images/stories/downloads/parent_center/rti_final.pdf, the brief can help teachers understand the concerns that parents might have about RTI as well as ways to include parents in the RTI process.

Indicators of School Readiness for RTI: A Self-Assessment Tool developed by the Colorado Department of Education can assist schools in understanding the changes they might need to make as they implement RTI. The tool, which addresses five broad indicators along with specific indicators and subtopics for each, includes a planning format for identifying specific actions to address the various indicators. The tool is available at http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/download/pdf/RTI_SelfAssessment_June2007.pdf. The Colorado Department of Education site also provides a configuration map that will assist schools in understanding what progress with implementation looks like at various levels (http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/download/pdf/RTI_Map.pdf).

Lessons From the Field and From Research on Managing Change That Can Help With RTI Implementation

Lessons From the Field

New RTI initiatives can benefit at all levels from implementation strategies that have been found to be effective in other settings. In the policy and funding realm, many of these strategies have been documented by states and districts. These lessons learned provide a rich source of ideas for creating demand for change, implementing changes in funding and policy, and monitoring the progress of the changes once they are adopted.

Lessons From the Literature

Applying the concept of magnitude of change could prove helpful to leaders at all levels of the system as they consider the implications of RTI within their organizations. When stakeholders view the changes associated with RTI as having the second-order implications noted in Table 1, school leaders could benefit from guidance regarding how to lead under these circumstances. Some effective leadership strategies for second-order change suggested by Waters and Grubb (2004) include three strategies: step back as a leader, support stakeholders, and do not give answers.

Step Back as a Leader. Changes with first-order implications can be managed easily by a leader who steps forward, takes charge, and moves ahead with little need for extended thought or discussion. On the other hand, change with second-order implications often is uncertain, uncharted, and ambiguous. In these circumstances, the wise leader might consider taking a step back and welcoming discussion, reassuring people that uncertainty is normal and encouraging people to be comfortable with ambivalence as they learn new skills and ways of working together. New ideas, new leadership, and new and better solutions may emerge during this time that will help move the initiative forward. For example, rather than providing a new schedule for general and special education teachers to meet together, a school principal might encourage discussion about the factors that need to be considered in the schedule and then solicit draft schedules from the staff. He or she might appoint a working group to gather opinions and then adopt the schedule the group feels will work best.

Support Stakeholders. Because change with first-order implications is routine, people often request their leaders to direct the process in a straightforward and unambiguous manner. The primary need for stakeholders may be explicit instructions regarding the specifics of the change. However, in change with second-order implications, stakeholders will need time to learn new knowledge and skills. The perceptive leader will ask, “What do you need to make this change happen, and how can I help?” The leader may provide access to expertise, time for stakeholders to learn together, and a mutually agreed-upon implementation schedule.

Do Not Give Answers; Instead, Ask the Right Questions. A leader who diagnoses the magnitude of change as second order will hesitate to provide answers to all the questions that arise during the change. Instead, the leader may address a concern by asking a question to build confidence, capacity, and ownership on the part of stakeholders. For example, if asked by a special education coordinator how records might be kept under the new RTI initiative, the wise division director might realize that the question arises from a background of careful recordkeeping that the coordinator worries might be lost under the new system. The principal will build capacity and ownership of the new way by refraining from providing an answer and asking the coordinator how he or she believes records might best be kept under the new system.

The guidance from Waters and Grubbs can apply to leaders with positional authority, such as principals, central office staff, and SEA personnel, but it also may apply to others within the organization who lead by assuming responsibility for achieving their agreed-upon goals.

In addition to using change management strategies, the perceptive school leader will consider the idea of managing personal transitions. Bridges (2003) notes the distinction between change and transition. For school leaders to manage transitions created by changes with second-order implications, they must understand how individuals respond to transitions and how they effectively can manage those responses. Leaders who manage change transitions understand that during change with second-order implications, stakeholders progress through Bridges's specified stages. Leaders can assist those in their organization by planning supportive activities at each stage, including formal celebrations of endings, recognizing the grieving that accompanies the loss of doing things the old way, building a new sense of identity in the organization, and developing positive metaphors for the new ways of working.

Conclusion

New RTI initiatives most likely will result in changes with second-order implications at each level within the public education system. Effective leaders not only will examine the successful experiences of other organizations but also will attempt to diagnose the effects of change on the stakeholders within their realm of responsibility. By doing this, and by actively managing change and the transitions that accompany change, they will increase the chances of successfully implementing their RTI initiative.

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