

The Center on Instruction's Perspective on Statewide Implementation of Response to Intervention

By the Center on Instruction

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an instructional framework based on the preventative treatment model first used in public health initiatives and later in public administration. Although several aspects of RTI at the classroom, school, and even district level are supported by research, much less is known about state-level implementation of the framework. In fact, states struggle with defining RTI implementation on such a large scale. The Center on Instruction is currently undertaking a collaborative project with eight states (Alaska, California, Idaho, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont, and Wyoming) and their seven regional comprehensive centers (Alaska, California, Mid-Atlantic, New England, Northwest, Southeast, and Texas) to provide one perspective of RTI implementation at the state level and how members of the Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network (including the content centers and regional comprehensive centers) can partner with states to effectively and efficiently support statewide implementation of RTI. This article discusses some of the ways in which states have begun to define statewide implementation of RTI and offers examples of the technical support that regional comprehensive centers provide states in the process.

States' interest in RTI implementation has grown since the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandated that states allow the use of a student's response to scientific, research-based intervention to detect a specific learning disability. Although this reference to scientifically based interventions may have been an early force in the development of RTI, states agree that RTI is a school-level and district-level framework that can improve instruction for all students. Therefore, states will be making a strong effort to refocus RTI as a true collaboration between general and special education. In fact, the Center on Instruction's focus on RTI is primarily at the level of general (core/Tier I/primary) instruction.

What Is Statewide Implementation of RTI?

Full RTI implementation does not have the clear definition for states that it does for districts and schools. For example, none of the states with which we work has interpreted full implementation to mean that all schools in the state will use RTI, nor have any of those states expressed the desire to require RTI for identifying a specific learning disability. In our experience, some states share an understanding of what statewide implementation of RTI could be, but not all do. For many states, full implementation of RTI at the state level means that a coherent state system of support is in place for schools and districts that are implementing RTI. These systems of support often include the following:

- State-developed guidance on RTI implementation
- State support for instruction in RTI
- State-provided professional development for RTI implementation
- State guidance on funding RTI implementation in schools and districts

State-Developed RTI Guidance on RTI Implementation

States have taken different approaches to providing guidance to their districts and schools on RTI implementation. Some states have released a formal guidance document that details the state's vision and goals for RTI implementation, along with specific guidelines for schools and teachers on instruction, intervention, and assessment within an RTI framework. Other states have chosen to highlight sites within the state that are implementing an RTI framework for instruction, along with releasing a more general document that briefly outlines the state's definition of RTI and the components that the state believes are core components of an RTI framework. Of course, several of the states in our project have combined these approaches, choosing elements of each that are best suited to their local circumstances.

It was not uncommon for states to release a guidance document that detailed the conceptual framework of RTI while leaving the specifics of many components up to districts and schools. States that took this approach often highlighted the current practices of local sites that were already experiencing successes with RTI implementation (e.g., in newsletters or on websites). In the Great Lakes West region, Wisconsin has approached guidance by developing a “road map” that outlines the steps that the state considers to be essential for implementing an RTI framework in the district. Illinois's guidance included piloting RTI in its districts and providing technical support through centers it maintains throughout the state. Districts not participating in the pilot were given opportunities to attend training sessions. Illinois is now part of the State Implementation of Scaling-up Evidence-based Practices Center (SISEP) project to scale up its ASPIRE regional support.

State Support for Instruction in an RTI Framework

States also have differed in their approaches to providing instructional supports for RTI implementation. In general, existing infrastructure can support all essential instructional aspects of RTI in a state. Involving all stakeholders near the beginning of the statewide implementation enhances the state's ability to identify and capitalize on overlaps between RTI and ongoing initiatives such as Reading First, state improvement grants, school improvement, and others. Many states have formed state-level implementation teams (often called coordination councils, collaboration councils, or RTI leadership teams) to ensure that stakeholders are involved in the process and share a common understanding of and vision for RTI implementation. In addition, because many states view RTI as a system of instruction rather than simply a method of determining eligibility for special education services, instructional support targets general education and ensures that all students receive high-quality, research-based instruction. Many states are implementing RTI as a collaborative effort between general and special education, and states such as Wisconsin have deliberately included members from both areas of education—as well as other stakeholders—on their state-level implementation teams.

State-Provided Professional Development for RTI Implementation

Professional development is another area in which some states have chosen to build on existing systems for the statewide implementation of RTI. Although states work to develop professional development modules for teachers; administrators; and, in some cases, parents; they have often

chosen to work with other stakeholders such as professional organizations and institutions of higher education. Our project states have developed various types of materials to ensure that all stakeholders are educated about RTI. One state developed a series of fact sheets, one-page documents that briefly outline the nature of RTI in that state. The content of these fact sheets was tailored to different audiences, such as parents, teachers, school and district administrators, politicians, teachers union representatives, and others. Another state developed what it called an RTI crosswalk, which described the way in which RTI shares goals with other education department initiatives as well as the ways in which RTI implementation affects the divisions within the state department of education. The crosswalk is now incorporated into the new hire training for all department of education employees in that state. Other states are working with local universities to develop long-distance or online training for practitioners. Wisconsin is planning an RTI summit that the curriculum and instruction division of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction will host jointly with other major organizations in the state, such as principal associations, teachers unions, and others.

State Guidance on Funding RTI Implementation in Schools and Districts

A crucial aspect of implementing RTI statewide is planning for scale-up and the sustainability of the initiative, a major component of which is to identify funding sources. Many states are currently developing formal guidance for their districts and schools that will outline how federal, state, and private funds can be used to support RTI in schools. The federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education is developing guidelines for states, districts, and schools on the allowable use of Title I, Title III, and Coordinated Early Intervening Services funds to support aspects of RTI implementation. Two of our project states have decided to produce this guidance in the form of an online tool that will allow users to input information about themselves to customize the funding sources recommended to them as befits their unique circumstances. The online tool will be released at a regional meeting with federal, state, and other stakeholders present (e.g., school accountants and auditors and other local funding personnel) to discuss aspects of funding RTI implementation. Also, SISEP is assisting individual states to work through issues that arise while scaling up RTI implementation.

How Are Regional Comprehensive Centers Assisting?

Regional comprehensive centers like Great Lakes West have been integral players in statewide RTI implementation. Their support of state-level RTI initiatives has included broad support, like facilitating regional professional learning communities, and specific assistance, such as rapid-response documents that focus on a specific request from a state. Through the aforementioned collaborative project, the Center on Instruction has had the opportunity to observe the evolving technical assistance relationships between states and regional comprehensive centers as they implement RTI statewide. For the past 12 months, the Center on Instruction has attended planning meetings and collected meeting notes, guidance documents in draft form, state-developed application forms, action plans, matrices, and assessments. From this information, the Center on Instruction has noted trends in the types of technical assistance that states request and the challenges and issues that arise during the large-scale implementation of RTI. The Center on Instruction has been impressed with the response of the regional comprehensive centers to the requests and needs of their member states. The seven collaborating regional comprehensive

centers, along with many other regional comprehensive centers, have begun to find their niche in supporting states' RTI implementation. Regional comprehensive centers work with states to do the following:

- Develop communities of practice.
- Provide states with access to national experts.
- Disseminate guidance and highlight effective models of implementation.
- Help develop action plans that allow states to move forward with implementation.

Communities of Practice and Access to Experts

Several regional comprehensive centers, in collaboration with other technical assistance centers, such as the regional resource centers funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), regional equity centers, parent information centers, and national centers like the National Center on Response to Intervention, facilitate communities of practice or professional learning communities in which states have the opportunity to learn from each others' experiences during implementation. The centers share ideas, experiences, and resources so that no state is left to reinvent the wheel but still has the latitude to respond to its own unique circumstances. These collaborations also can help provide the momentum that is always necessary and often lacking when systemic change is implemented on such a large scale. Because the regional comprehensive centers are not inherently affiliated with either general education or special education divisions within the state department, the centers' facilitation of collaborative efforts like these also helps maintain the joint ownership of RTI implementation because neither education division is perceived to be taking the lead on the collaborative effort.

In these collaborative efforts, regional comprehensive centers have provided states' access to experts in the field who otherwise might have been inaccessible to them. For example, several regional comprehensive centers have hosted webinar series during which researchers and practitioners have presented research-based guidance on RTI and answered questions from the participants. In this way, regional comprehensive centers have broadened the reach of the state departments to access new information about RTI. Regional comprehensive centers also have sometimes invited experts to participate in or consult with leadership teams during the development and first implementation of the statewide plan so as to put their expertise into practice near the beginning of the implementation process. Because regional comprehensive centers generally work with more than one state, they often organize regional meetings or summits.

One regional meeting recently took place in Rosemont, Illinois. The North Central Regional Resource Center, five regional comprehensive centers (Great Lakes East, Great Lakes West, Mid-Atlantic, Mid-Continent, and North Central), and the National Center for Response to Intervention jointly hosted the North Central Regional RTI Summit, which brought together teams from nine states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), along with invited representatives from OSEP, the Center on Instruction, and the IDEA Partnership. This event gave state department personnel the time and space to convene and plan their next steps as they received new information about topics

pertinent to implementation (such as evaluation, equity, funding, and scale-up) from presentations by national experts. Presentation topics covered RTI implementation in middle and high schools, evaluation, RTI as an issue of equity, and funding sources for RTI.

Spreading the RTI Message

In addition to helping states build a foundation of knowledge of RTI and their experience with its implementation, regional comprehensive centers also assist states with identifying and highlighting existing models of implementation within the state. In the Center on Instruction's project, several regional comprehensive centers hosted online seminars during which districts and schools within a state were invited to present existing models of implementation. Because the state department and regional comprehensive center decided which schools presented their experiences with RTI, a coherent message about essential components, preferred implementation models, and demonstrated successes was delivered to large, diverse audiences across the state. A regional comprehensive center working with a state to help disseminate the state's vision for RTI can help build consensus for the state's implementation plan because regional comprehensive centers are external organizations. Again, the regional comprehensive center's capacity for facilitating online—or in some cases, face-to-face—meetings with various stakeholder groups can help to ensure that a coherent and consistent message about RTI implementation is being presented across the state.

Action Planning

On a more practical level, regional comprehensive centers work with states to develop action plans with short-term goals and tasks for RTI implementation. Regional comprehensive centers often help find research and then help translate it into practice. Statewide RTI implementation often means utilizing bodies of research outside the education field that apply to the challenges that state departments face. Specifically, regional comprehensive centers help states develop a research-based perspective on many issues: large-scale implementation of community-based initiatives, scaling up from local implementation to statewide implementation, sources of funding and allowable uses of funds, the applicability of RTI in unique situations such as secondary schools, and implementing RTI with culturally and linguistically diverse students. With the support of the content centers, regional comprehensive centers can provide summaries of these areas of research to states and help them apply it to their own implementation of RTI.

Centers like the Center on Instruction and Great Lakes West are invested in building the capacity of states to implement and sustain RTI statewide and are continually working to do so. As states like Wisconsin and Illinois continue to advance this initiative, the goal continues to be improvement in educational opportunities for all students. The Center on Instruction looks forward to continuing to assist regional comprehensive centers like Great Lakes West, and through them, all states, in achieving this goal.