

What is RtI?

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a school wide process used for the purpose of identifying the most effective teaching strategies for struggling learners. It is a multi-tiered approach to providing services at increasing levels of intensity. It involves universal screening, high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, frequent progress monitoring, and the use of child response data to make educational decisions.

Creating Return on Investment in Special Education – Using the RtI Model

by Robert Pasternack Ph.D.

Special education is an expensive proposition. Nationally, 25% of all funds spent by public schools are spent on approximately 12% of the student body—those with disabilities receiving special education services. Special education enrollment across the country has grown from 1 million to 7 million students. While the Federal special education law, IDEA, promised that schools would receive 40% of the excess costs to educate students in special education, allocations are less than 19% of the excess costs—more than 30 years into the program. Schools are scrambling to find needed resources to provide students with disabilities the services they are entitled to under federal law.

Estimates on how much is spent on special education vary, but experts agree that more than \$80 billion was spent by our nation's schools last year serving students with disabilities. Business officials and educational leaders are turning their attention to getting a return on this investment, as we begin to bring business principles to principals in our schools. Leaders are concerned that tax dollars are well spent for improving academic achievement for ALL students, including those with disabilities. The growth in special education expenditures and the numbers of students with disabilities served in the nation's 17,000 school districts can't remain unchallenged. Applying the Return on Investment model to special education is part of rethinking special education, and asking the difficult question: "What is special about special education for students with mild disabilities?"

Out of 13 eligibility categories, **approximately 60% of students with disabilities are identified as having a Specific Learning Disability.** While there are 7 types of learning disabilities, 80-90% of students with disabilities in this category are there because they can't read. Research indicates that many of the students receiving special education are not disabled; they are victims of poor instruction. As a result, they often end up receiving costly special education services rather than less intensive, less expensive, and more appropriate educational services.

Before IDEA 2004, identifying students with specific learning disabilities required a documented discrepancy between expected and actual academic achievement. The IQ/Achievement discrepancy model requires schools to wait for students to fail for long periods of time before they are diagnosed with a specific learning disability and determined to be eligible for special education services. **While schools wait, and these students fail,** there is a vast loss of

human capital, as students with disabilities drop out of school at twice the rate of non-disabled students. Additionally there are enormous financial costs as large sums of school money are spent on diagnosis for classification purposes, including unneeded IQ tests. To fix these problems and improve the return on our investment of special education money, the Response to Intervention (RtI) paradigm found its way into IDEA 2004 and is finding its way into school districts across America.

With the RtI model there is ongoing monitoring of progress by students, catching those who don't learn in the first tier

continues on page 4

Key Terms*

Response to Intervention (RtI) is an array of procedures that can be used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in instruction. RtI provides an improved process and structure for school teams in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions.

Universal Screening is a step taken by school personnel early in the school year to determine which students are "at risk" for not meeting grade level standards. Universal screening can be accomplished by reviewing recent results of state tests, or by administering an academic screening test to all children in a given grade level. Those students whose test scores fall below a certain cut-off are identified as needing more specialized academic interventions.

Student Progress Monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used to frequently assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Progress monitoring procedures can be used with individual students or an entire class.

Scientific, Research-Based Instruction refers to specific curriculum and educational interventions that have been proven to be effective—that is, the research has been reported in scientific, peer-reviewed journals.

*National Association of School Psychologists

Special Edition Part 5

Response to Intervention and Behavior

In this era of diminishing resources and the wide, diverse learning needs of students, local school divisions are hard pressed to select the most cost effective and outcome rich student support programs. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 states have been given authority to adopt Response to Intervention strategies used by educators in the general education classroom. Response to Intervention is a system of applying universal screening approaches to all students and increasing more intensive interventions to individual students as it is warranted or when students do not respond at the first level. This model is dependent upon the use of scientifically evidence based intervening strategies while collecting data that reveals which strategy is working. With this approach schools no longer have to wait to see if students will catch on and students no longer have to wait to fail before they receive the intensive help they may need to be on grade level.

More and more schools nationally are beginning to learn about the promise of RtI and are adopting the model to support early literacy and math skills acquisition. Important landmark research is demonstrating that RtI has application in managing student behavior as well as academics. With the 1997 IDEA reauthorization, provisions were added ensuring that students with disabilities whose behavior posed an impediment to learning would have the help they needed early on. To better manage behaviors and ultimately ensure academic progress, proactive and positive behavior supports (PBS) were included in individual IEPs. Researchers from the University of Oregon are studying the implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) in the Response to Intervention model. Just as schools have adopted early screening for all students in reading and math, others are looking at strategies to deter school violence. "If you raise achievement, behavior decreases. If you decrease behavior academics improve," according to Jeffrey Sprague, PhD of the University of Oregon Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior.

In addressing school wide behavior in the context of RtI, a framework of appropriate behavior is instituted for all students. In the first tier a universal screening

process is adopted. It works to prevent problem behaviors from occurring in the majority of the student body. For students who do not respond to the first intervention the next more intensive tier of intervention is implemented. The active collection of data for decision making purposes is an integral part of the design. "SWPBS is conceptualized as the redesign of environments rather than the redesign of individuals, leading to valued outcomes, including academic and behavioral competence. Examples of universal prevention include defining, posting, and explicitly teaching school expectations, acknowledging appropriate behavior, and actively supervising non classroom areas."

The promise of RtI and behavior has yet to be realized in the majority of American schools today. However, the tensions that exist between efforts to advance student achievement while supporting students' unique learning needs will require a fresh approach for educators. As the research continues to demonstrate successful outcomes related to RtI and behavior, more schools will be looking to this strategy as an investment whose return is too great to overlook.

"RtI and PBS". p.15. University of Oregon, Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior. 15 May 2007 <<http://www.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/index.htm>>.

McIntosh, Kent, David J. Chard, Joseph B. Boland, and Robert H Horner. "Demonstration of Combined Efforts in School-wide Academic and Behavioral Systems and Incidence of Reading and Behavior Challenges in Early Elementary Grades". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*. Volume 8, Number 3, Summer 2006, pages 146-154.

Special Edition Part 5

Reading Difficulties and Behavioral Issues

A significant body of research demonstrates a relationship between students identified as having emotional disorders and their poor academic attainment. One only needs to look at the overall outcomes of this group of students to realize the association. Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS 2002) reveals the following.

- Approximately 50% of students identified as having emotional disorders have the lowest grade point average of all disability categories.
 - More than 66% have failed the competency exam for their grade level.
 - Only a third of students with emotional and behavior disorders have completed high school.
- Not all children with reading problems have a disability nor do all children with disabilities have reading problems. One thing is apparent however, children who struggle to learn to read are at greater risk for developing emotional difficulties than children who are reading at appropriate developmental stages. “It is clear from our NICHD [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development]-supported longitudinal studies that follow good and poor readers from kindergarten into young adulthood that our young poor readers are largely doomed to failure from the beginning. By the end of the first grade, we begin to notice substantial decreases in the children’s self-

esteem, self-concept, and motivation to learn to read if they have not been able to master reading skills and keep up with their classmates. As we follow the children through elementary and middle school grades, these problems compound. By high school, these children’s potential for entering college has decreased to almost nil, with few choices available to them with respect to occupational and vocational opportunities. These individuals constantly tell us that they hate to read, primarily because it is such hard work, and their reading so slow and laborious. As an adolescent in one of our longitudinal studies remarked, ‘I would rather have a root canal than read.’”

Still there is an overlap between reading difficulties and behavior problems. There is a higher incidence of reading difficulties reported among children with behavior disorders and a higher incidence of behavior disorders among children with learning disabilities. Conclusive evidence is not available with respect to the impacts of reading interventions and improvements in behavior. Emerging research from Peabody College of Vanderbilt has noted promising reading outcomes for students with emotional and behavior disorders when specific reading interventions are put in place. At the time of the study no noted positive change in behavior was detected but the authors of the study believe further investigation is warranted.

Falk, Katherine B., Kathleen L. Lane, Amanda C. Strong,, Joseph H. Wehby. “The Impact of a Structured Reading Curriculum and Repeated Reading on the Performance of Junior High Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders”. *School Psychology Review*, 2004, Volume 33, No. 4, pages 561-581.

White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development. Address by G. Reid Lyon, Chief, Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institutes of Health. Summary Comments, July 27, 2001.

Prior, Margot, Ann Sanson, Diana Smart. “Connections Between Reading Disability and Behavior Problems: Testing Temporal and Causal Hypotheses”. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. June, 1996. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0902/is_n3_v24/ai_18667527>. 15 May 07

Ibid. “The Impact of a Structured Reading Curriculum and Repeated Reading on the Performance of Junior High Students With Emotional and Behavior Disorders”. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0902/is_n3_v24/ai_18667527>. 15 May 07

Special Edition Part 5

cont. from page 1

and providing alternate methods before a referral to special education is made. Data gathered through monitoring allows teachers and administrators to use data-driven decision making rather than depending on a flawed “wait and see” model. The RtI approach is a proven effective solution that allows problems to be identified early, offering early intervention for struggling students (particularly in the area of reading). **Diagnosis for classification purposes is replaced by our ability to diagnose students to identify their instructional needs.**

For the first time in the history of special education, school districts can now spend 15% of their IDEA funds on keeping students out of special education by using these funds to deliver early intervention to struggling students, before referring them for possible placement in special education. When special education began, students were to be diagnosed with a disability, receive remediation, accelerate achievement, and then go back to regular education. In this revolving door model... students enter, receive needed services, then leave. Unfortunately, special education now resembles a trap door. Students are diagnosed, enter special education, receive services, often make little or no

progress, and remain trapped until they exit, too often by dropping out of school.

As stated earlier, the dropout rate for students with disabilities is twice the dropout rate for their non-disabled peers. The dropout problem is particularly acute for African American; Hispanic/Latino; and American Indian students. Schools and districts identified by the SEA as having disproportionality in special education MUST spend 15% of their IDEA funds to address this issue. Rather than having the option to spend 15% of IDEA funds to keep students out of special education, schools having a disproportionate representation of minority students in special education MUST spend 15% of their IDEA funds on reducing or eliminating disproportionality. RtI addresses this issue by providing the tools schools need to monitor student progress and focus on those students who are not responding to increasingly intense interventions. RtI is general education reform at the building level. It provides instructional leaders with effective tools to address the differentiated instructional needs of a diverse student population.

RtI aligns with the focused monitoring model of helping schools and school dis-

tricts comply with IDEA, by focusing on the academic progress made by students; and reinventing special education to focus on the outcomes achieved by students with disabilities. The failure of the desegregated group of students with disabilities to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in many schools requires a new approach to meeting the instructional needs of these students. RtI is the approach that will lead schools to focus on academic progress of students, including those with disabilities. If instruction is not leading to student progress, the interventions should and must be changed. **If students don't learn the way we teach, we must teach the way they learn.** RtI is the tool needed to help schools monitor progress, and continually adjust interventions to ensure students are learning. This approach will reduce disproportionality and enhance compliance with IDEA.

Continuing to do business as usual while expecting different results is impossible at this time of focus on accountability in education. School business officials know that in this era of diminishing resources and increasing need we can't afford to ignore doing the right thing, by implementing the RtI model as part of educating ALL our children.

Robert Pasternack Ph.D. is Vice President in the Educational Services Division of Voyager Learning and the former Assistant US Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services under President George W. Bush. For more information about Voyager Learning please visit: <http://www.voyagerlearning.com/index.jsp>

For more information on RtI please visit:

International Reading Association (IRA) has numerous materials that focus on RtI in their “Focus on Topics in Reading” section.

<http://www.reading.org/>

LD Online.org offers comprehensive information about learning disabilities. In addition to providing information to families the site also serves adolescents and adults with learning disabilities.

Two other comprehensive educational sites by **WETA-TV, LD Online's** developer are **ReadingRockets.org** and **ColorinColorado.org (Spanish)**. <http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics>

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers online fact sheets. <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/rtiprimer.aspx>

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) offers a downloadable Parent's Guide to Response –to – Intervention. http://www.nclld.org/images/stories/downloads/parent_center/rti_final.pdf

National Center on Student Progress Monitoring. The National Center for information for parents and beginners, as well as for reading and math experts. They also evaluate the scientific rigor of commercially available tools to monitor student's progress.

<http://www.studentprogress.org/chart/default.asp>

National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) conducts research on the identification of learning disabilities; formulates implementation recommendations; disseminates findings; and provides technical assistance to national, state, and local constituencies.

<http://www.nrclld.org/>

The SchwabLearning.org website primarily serves parents whose kids (kindergarten through high school) have learning difficulties.

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.aspx?r=1057>