

Ask A School Psychologist: Part 1 Of 2 – What Is Response To Intervention (RTI)?

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The field of education is constantly evolving and parents (and teachers) often find it challenging to keep up with the newest education initiative, let alone its acronym. With the speed of the coming (and going) of new initiatives, teachers and parents frequently have a superficial understanding of the latest in education and sometimes are outright confused and frustrated. Over the past few years, the approach to teaching students through a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework has been examined and initiated in many provinces. Most educators are becoming aware of RTI as there has been multiple professional development sessions in our province. Parents are beginning to hear more about RTI, but there is confusion on the composition of framework and the impact on students. So...

What is RTI?

RTI is a tiered process of instruction that when implemented effectively, ensures that schools provide all students with appropriate, high-quality instructional goals and materials. RTI provides a framework that assesses students' skills on a regular basis, identifying next steps in instruction for all students and the need for additional interventions for some students who are not making expected progress. The power of RTI is that struggling students are identified quickly so schools can provide classroom instruction at the right level (Zone of Proximal Development) along with research-based interventions, so that students can make progress and realize their potential. Early intervention means more chances for success so no student 'Falls through the Cracks.'

This framework is a result of education system reform in the United States, where a significant number of students were being identified as learning disabled. Researchers found that many of these students' learning challenges were a result of inadequacies in whole group instruction that did not reflect individual learner needs.

For example, Johnny has been reading at a Grade 1 level for three years; over the past three years, he has been read to but has never been taught how to improve his reading skills. Basically, 'Response to Intervention' refers to a process that emphasizes how well students respond to classroom instruction that is tailored to student needs - all students are learning, making progress; no student's learning is stagnant. RTI is generally implemented in language arts and math subject areas, focusing on the mastery of the 3 Rs in elementary schools. However, the basic premises can be used in various subjects and are being implemented in secondary schools as well.

How does RTI Work?

The essential purpose of RTI is that all students' learning progress is regularly assessed and the data obtained through assessment is used to determine next steps in instruction. These key premises have been interpreted by government bodies, researchers, consultants and school boards. Consequently, a RTI model can sometimes be labeled as a Response to Instruction (Rtl) or a Multi-

Tier System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Each interpretation can have subtle differences such as levels of support and implementation practices.

However, there are four foundational components of any responsive education framework: Multi-Tiered Model of School Support, Assessment, Evidence-Based Instruction and Interventions, and Instructional Match for each student.

In practice, all students' learning profiles are assessed in the Fall and the data collected is used to design instruction in the regular classroom:

1. Universal Instruction for the majority of students that reflects grade expectations.
2. Targeted Instruction for a smaller group of students who do not respond in the expected way to Universal Instruction and are less than two years behind grade level expectations.
3. Individualized Instruction for a smaller group of students who do not respond to Targeted Instruction in the expected way and are more than two years behind grade level expectations.

In effect, all students are in the regular classroom receiving instruction that is differentiated for their learning needs - work is not too hard or too easy. It is just right. Students may require different levels of instruction in different academic areas (e.g. a student responds to grade level Universal Instruction in math but requires Targeted Instruction in math).

To facilitate accelerated learning in an RTI model, students who are less than two years behind grade level expectations receive an additional 30 minutes a day of evidence-based intervention on skills they are struggling with. Students who are more than two years behind grade level expectations receive an additional 45 minutes a day of evidence-based intensive skill intervention. With this level of instructional focus, research indicates that students who are capable of learning but have not realized their potential can catch up and achieve grade level expectations.

RTI has incredible potential for student learning but there is a need for consumer (student, parent, educator) understanding, and there are cautions and pitfalls to be aware of. More on those topics in our next column: RTI: Part 2.

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