1

Principles of RTI and Implications in the Classroom

Who can argue with an educational system that is designed to meet the needs of all students where they are, when they have those needs, with what they actually need?

WHAT IS RTI?

While RTI is currently one of the most talked-about initiatives in education, it remains one of the greatest mysteries with the most unanswered questions. Presently, there are still debates as to the RTI acronym itself. Some literature calls it "Response to Intervention," other documents call it "Response to Instruction," and still others call it "Response to Intervention and Instruction." In practice, RTI is both: a focus on the student's response to instruction as well as the student's response to intervention. The term *response* also refers to the teacher's response to student performance and data as well.

The more the concepts of RTI are explored, the more meaning each of the words holds. Aside from its name, this multifaceted educational initiative has stirred questions from just about every aspect of the educational

system. What are the implications for special education or gifted education? What are the responsibilities of the general education classroom teacher? How does an administrator establish an RTI team within a school? In what ways does RTI change the roles of the support team players such as guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers? There seem to be as many questions as confirmations.

One reason for the large number of unanswered questions is that this initiative touches on so many aspects of the educational system. Since the mid 1990s, the standards-based reform efforts and student accountability efforts have been center stage, influencing the focus of educational change (Rudebusch, 2008). In 2001, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, the focus shifted from providing services to monitoring the quality and effectiveness of those services. In addition, with the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), the efforts for all students to have access to research-based, high-quality curriculum was even more greatly reinforced (Rudebusch, 2008). Greater demands of Adequate Yearly Progress for all students as well as for each subgroup defined by the NCLB law continue to increase the pressure for accountability based on assessment data and highest student achievement for all students. All of these forces have broadened the scope of personnel involved with these efforts and with implementation of RTI, which encompasses both accountability and student achievement. RTI has been supported by a number of major initiatives, including the National Reading Panel, the National Research Council Panel on Minority Overrepresentation, and the President's Committee on Excellence in Special Education, to name a few (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 2006). Therefore, there is not a single stakeholder within the educational system that remains untouched by the efforts associated with RTI. Consensus reports from multiple national panels, along with technical assistance papers and white papers from national educational organizations, show evidence of RTI's all-inclusive nature.

So while educators are working to keep up with the research and professional learning about RTI, each is also asking, "How does this affect me?" And the answer is . . . in every way. RTI is a change in thinking about how the educational system functions to meet the needs of students. RTI happens all day, every day for all students rather than just during a specific period of time or for a specific group of students (Howard, 2009). It is an integrated system designed to meet the needs of all students by providing them with supports they need when they need them, rather than based on a schedule or calendar. RTI approaches the challenges a learner faces by proactively asking, "What can be done to help?" rather than "What can we name this problem?" RTI is a model of prevention rather than failure (NASDSE, 2006). It brings together all the strongest

initiatives within education and reflects foundations of NCLB, IDEIA, differentiated instruction, positive behavioral support, inclusion, and teacher collaboration efforts.

While RTI is supported and influenced by several special education movements, it is not a new venue to identify students for special education. It is also not a framework of forms and procedures to formalize meetings and eligibility processes. RTI involves all students, including those who are high-achieving and gifted. It is founded on instruction and student achievement and begins in the classroom. RTI is for every student who ever says, "I don't understand," "I missed it," or even "This is too easy."

With its far-reaching influences, RTI provides a catalyst to move the educational system forward to a point where it has never been before. It demands both philosophical changes as well as changes in practice. It requires all those members of the educational system to look differently at the entire process of teaching, learning, and meeting the needs of students in a variety of ways. It moves differentiated instruction to a whole new plane and changes the way we identify students' needs and serve students. RTI brings us to an exciting new arena in education and holds new promises for a future educational system that really begins with students at the center.

So what is RTI? There is a great deal of information about it, and yet there is still not a consistent answer to that question. There are multiple definitions of RTI. The National Center on Response to Intervention (n.d.) defines it as the integration of "assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems" (para. 1). RTI includes the practices of identifying students at risk, monitoring student progress, implementing evidence-based interventions, and adjusting the intensity and nature of those interventions based on student performance as reflected in the data.

PRINCIPLES OF RTI

There are consistencies in the characteristics of all RTI efforts. These characteristics have become more important than what names we assign the initials of RTI. The following characteristics describe the essence of this initiative, and it is through these common descriptions that both a philosophy and practice can be developed:

- addresses both academic and behavioral domains
- creates a systematic dynamic process for instruction and intervention
- applies to students in general education, special education, English language, and gifted programs

- demands that all students have access to quality core instruction
- examines student performance, classroom conditions, instructional factors, and schoolwide structures
- expects that some students will need additional supports and services beyond the core curriculum and general behavioral expectations
- provides a process for decision making based on clear data for every student
- requires continuous progress monitoring and formative assessments to drive instruction
- responds to learner needs when they are recognized and involves intervention that comes without labels
- strives to go beyond students making some gains to students making accelerated gains at a rate that will allow them to not fall further behind
- includes aspects beyond the instructional time and considers the student as a whole child

CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

RTI addresses both academic and behavioral domains.

Unlike traditional models in education, RTI recognizes the fact that behavior and academics are both equally related to student performance and academic success. Therefore, the model considers the academic well-being of students as well as their behavioral aspects. It acknowledges that learning takes place when the learner is in a state that includes both positive cognitive and behavioral conditions. This recognizes that the best teaching can fall on deaf ears and nonresponsive learners if the learning state is not healthy. In a classroom where students are feeling unsafe or unsure of acceptance or rejection, there is greater likelihood that they will disconnect from learning (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004). It also acknowledges that in order for students to be successful, structures must be in place for both learning and behavioral expectations.

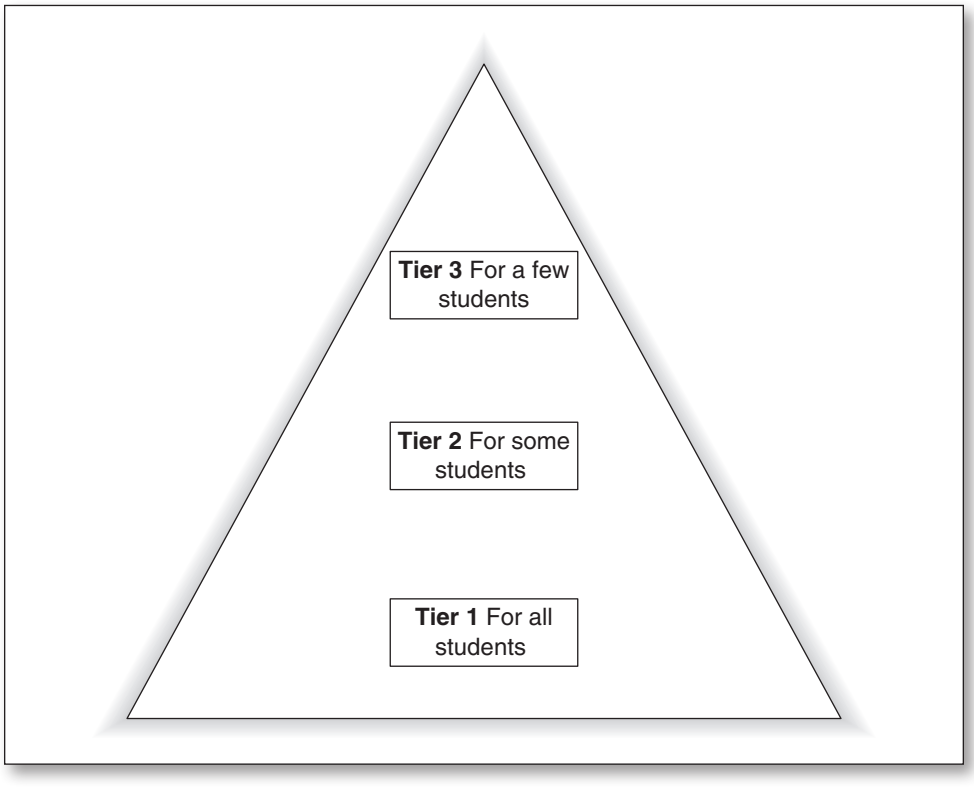
The implications for the classroom teacher are philosophical and practical in nature. First, students are more than receptacles of knowledge. Expectations must be clear and specific for students to achieve success. These expectations take into account the whole child and go beyond simply the learning expectations. Second, for students to be successful, both academic and behavioral expectations must be clearly stated and addressed. It cannot be assumed that students know the appropriate behaviors and rules of the class culture any more than it can be assumed that they come with the background knowledge needed to process new content. Instructional practices and behavioral and instructional expectations with structures are needed for effective learning to occur.

RTI creates a systematic dynamic process for instruction and intervention.

As a natural by-product, RTI provides a decision-making process based on student data. Assessment is a cornerstone of the model. Multiple levels of assessment are used to make decisions at different levels. Information from screening assessments, diagnostic assessments, and clinical assessments all have a place within RTI, and their place is defined. All of these components work together to provide a framework that is systematic and streamlined in nature.

The tiers of RTI provide a structure for this process of determining the level of support that each student needs. The tiers are not indicators of the students themselves but instead are indicators of levels of support that are needed. Typically, the most widely used models involve three or four tiers (see Figure 1.1). At Tier 1, all students participate in core instruction and universal behavioral systems. The focus at Tier 1 is a core instruction that is high quality, research based, systematic, and developmentally appropriate. Universal behavioral systems are schoolwide and classroom-wide systems with clearly stated expectations and consequences. These are positively

Figure 1.1 RTI for Academics and Behavior



stated and reinforced. Assessments most widely used in Tier 1 include screening instruments, universal screenings, and progress monitoring tools.

Tier 2 provides more services or supports for students who need something in addition to the core curriculum and instruction or universal behavioral system. This tier is characterized by "something more" and beyond the norm. It includes small-group instruction for reteaching and remediation as well as enrichment for students who need additional challenges. Decisions about when and what to provide for specific students are based on data. This data usually comes from more specific diagnostic types of assessments. Decisions about providing more supports or services are made on a case-by-case basis. They are not made just once each year, but rather are constantly adjusted for each learning experience throughout the school year. The objective of providing additional supports at this increased level of intensity is to promote student success in the Tier 1 core curriculum through the use of supplemental services, supports, and materials. The interventions are aligned to the instructional needs determined by assessments during core instruction.

Tier 3 is in place for students who need more than the supplemental supports provided in Tier 2. This tier is characterized by individualized, intensive supports. There are a very small number of students who need this level of intensity of support; however, the expectation is that there will be a few students who need more supports than can be provided even in Tier 2. Data for decision making at this level vary due to the individualized nature of Tier 3. Data collection at this stage may include specialized testing or additional targeted diagnostics. Supports may be provided by someone with specialized skills or expertise in the area of the student's need. The objective of providing additional supports at this increased level of intensity is to promote student success with Tier 2 interventions, which will in turn support the core instruction provided in Tier 1. Tier 3 also directly supports the core instruction through intensive supports and services. The interventions are aligned to the needs evidenced in the small-group instruction of Tier 2 as well as the core instruction in Tier 1.

One implication for the classroom teacher is the emphasis on, and necessity of, flexible grouping. Teachers must implement flexible grouping practices to respond to learners' needs. This flexible grouping is determined by data rather than by the use of student labels. The purpose is to meet students' needs so that they are able to experience success with the core curriculum. Unlike grouping done for the purpose of community building in the classroom, flexible grouping is intentional and homogeneous in nature. Student performance levels within a group are similar to each other so that students may receive the same instructional supports. Groups are defined by needs rather than chance or combining students with wide ranges of ability.

Another implication here is that the interventions are systematically designed to support what is happening throughout the core instructional

experiences. Rather than removing a struggling student and providing interventions in place of the core instruction, these interventions are implemented in addition to and in conjunction with the core instruction. The interventions become systematic and directly connected to the student performance within the core curriculum.

In the past, a struggling student may have been removed for a period of the day to receive additional supports and services. Often these were not connected to the content or skills being learned in the classroom. Services and supports were isolated and disjointed. With RTI, the purpose of Tier 2 is to support the student in being successful in Tier 1. The skills keeping the student from experiencing success in Tier 1 are the skills targeted for added supports. These added supports are the Tier 2 services, and they become directly linked to what is happening in Tier 1.

RTI applies to students in general education, special education, English language programs, and gifted programs.

RTI is built on the foundations of powerful legislation, including NCLB and IDEIA. It reinforces the concept that "all means all." RTI does not exclude anyone from this system, which is designed to acknowledge each student as an individual with both strengths and needs. Through data collection, each student is viewed as an individual, in relation to peers and as part of a larger group. This data identifies similarities and differences that exist between individual students and groups of students. RTI is rooted in honoring those findings.

RTI is a structural organization for providing supports and services. In the past, unless a student was identified and then qualified as having special needs, there was no structure for supports and services. Those students who had an individualized education program (IEP) did have a structure and received systematic services and supports based on needs. RTI creates a system whereby a student may receive systematic supports and services without an IEP. That does not mean that an IEP is no longer necessary. The IEP documents goals within the core curriculum as well as some that may be outside the general education curriculum. However, because a student has an IEP and qualifies for a program under the American with Disabilities Act, the student still has a need for the RTI structure. The two are simply layered. They do not work as parallel and independent systems, but instead blend into one system. The student will still have needs within the core curriculum at Tier 1, possibly small-group supports at Tier 2, and additionally some individualized supports and services at Tier 3. Even the students with the most significant disabilities need different amounts of supports for different learning tasks. RTI provides the framework to match levels of need to amounts of support.

Because the premise of RTI is to provide systematic supports and services matched to individual needs of students, the model certainly applies

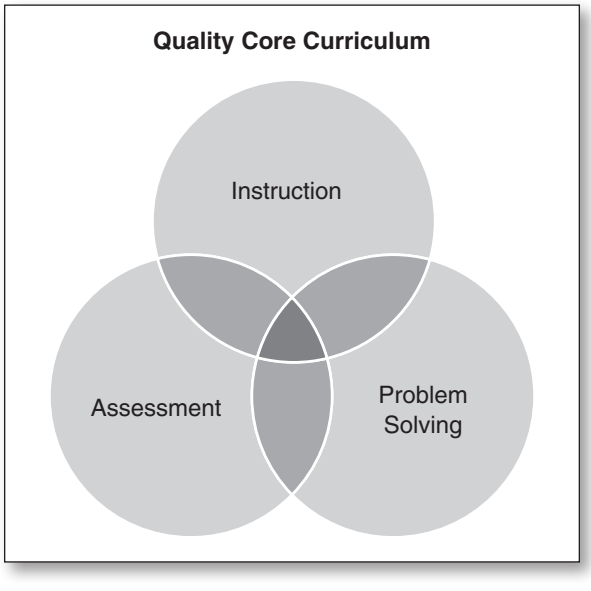
to gifted students as well. These students are identified as gifted because they have characteristics that fall outside the general parameters of the educational system's standard expectations. These students have needs that are unique and go beyond the core curriculum. In many instances, students identified as gifted need additional challenge, motivation, behavioral, social, or emotional supports. There are also gifted students who do not excel in all areas and may need supports for a particular area of academic weakness, just as students not identified as gifted would. In all of these instances, the student reflects a need that goes beyond the core curriculum at Tier 1.

RTI demands that all students have access to quality core instruction.

The RTI initiative is an interdependent system composed of classroom instruction, student assessment, and problem solving for the purpose of intervention (see Figure 1.2). These three elements come together with each student at the center and rest on a foundation of a quality, research-based, systematic core curriculum.

RTI is aligned to the efforts of IDEIA by emphasizing that all students have access to quality core instruction. This requirement is not new. It has been in place in the educational system since 1997. However, RTI has made it even stronger. Not only is this expectation clearly stated in IDEIA, but RTI takes these efforts a step further by creating some expectations of success within the core instruction. RTI provides standards that have never been set before in the educational system. RTI is founded on the expectation that all students will receive instruction with a quality, research-based core curriculum and that a substantial number of students will be successful. RTI research historically has set the expectation that approximately 80% of students will be successful when quality instruction has been provided on a strong core curriculum. This same percentage also applies as an expectation of success when a clear universal behavioral program has been implemented.

Figure 1.2 Elements of RTI



This is revolutionary for two reasons. The first is that there is now an expectation set forth regarding student success as a whole. The RTI initiative communicates that with high-quality instruction, approximately 80% of students should be successful. Along with that expectation comes the idea that if approximately 80% of students are not successful, it is the system or instruction that needs to change or adjust. This principle clarifies expectations of and for the classroom teacher.

RTI suggests that approximately 80% of students will be successful in learning after quality instruction has been provided. If 80% of students are not successful, it is the instruction that needs to be examined rather than the student learning. If, after identifying that a lesson has been implemented through quality curriculum and instruction, 80% of students are not successful, reteaching or a different approach to teaching needs to be done. If a classroom behavior plan is in place and less than 80% of students are complying with the behavioral system, the system needs to be adjusted.

This also answers the age-old question about when it is time to move on with a new learning objective. If 80% of students have responded with success to the curriculum and instruction, it is time to move on in the instructional sequence. This does not mean a teacher should give up on the students who have not reached a level of success, but it does indicate the appropriate time to move forward with instruction. For instance, if students have received two weeks of quality instruction on multiplication of double-digit numbers and more than 80% of the class is now successful with the skill, it is time to move to the next skill.

This concept of 80% success is another way to gauge whether students' needs are being met. If 80% are successful, then the system is working. If less than 80% are successful, the system is not working and needs to change.

RTI examines student performance, classroom conditions, instructional factors, and schoolwide structures.

One reason why RTI is so all-encompassing is that it addresses so many aspects of the educational system. It approaches student learning in and of itself as well as within the classroom environment. It also recognizes that the classroom environment is one part of a larger system of the whole school. RTI considers student learning as the product of the interaction between the learner and the curriculum as well as between the learner, the curriculum, and the instruction (see Figure 1.3).

Beyond this interaction, RTI acknowledges that the classroom is one element of the bigger system that comprises the school community. The classroom is influenced and impacted by the school as a whole, and these schoolwide influences affect not only the classroom, but the individual student as well (see Figure 1.4).

There are a few strong implications for the classroom teacher. The first is related to concepts of the whole-child approach. When considering a student's success or lack thereof, considerations extend beyond the

Figure 1.3 The Interactive Nature of Learning

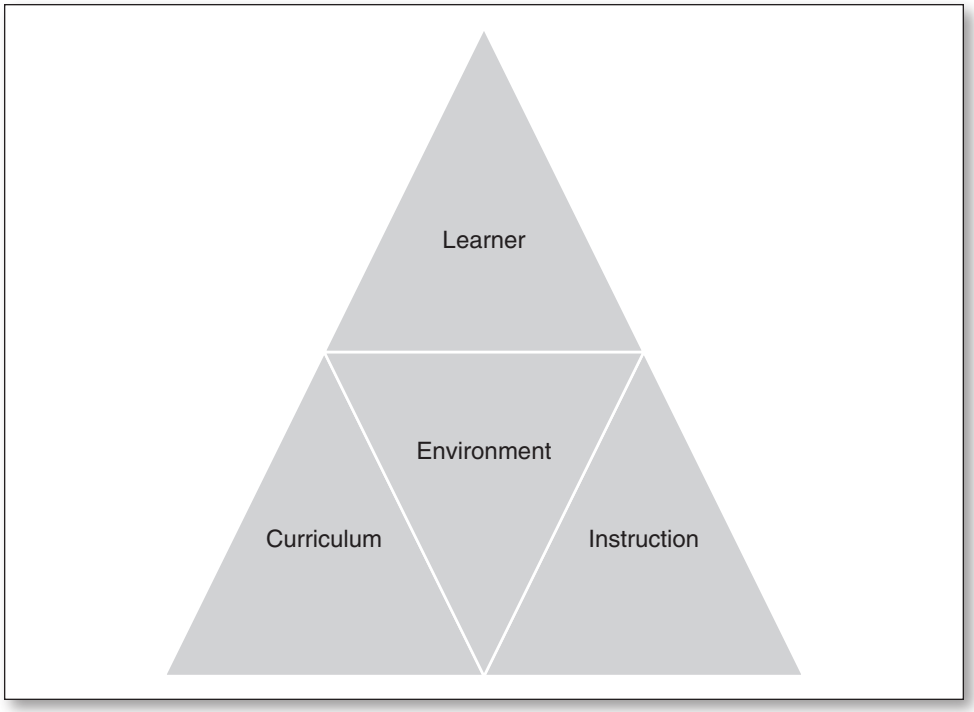
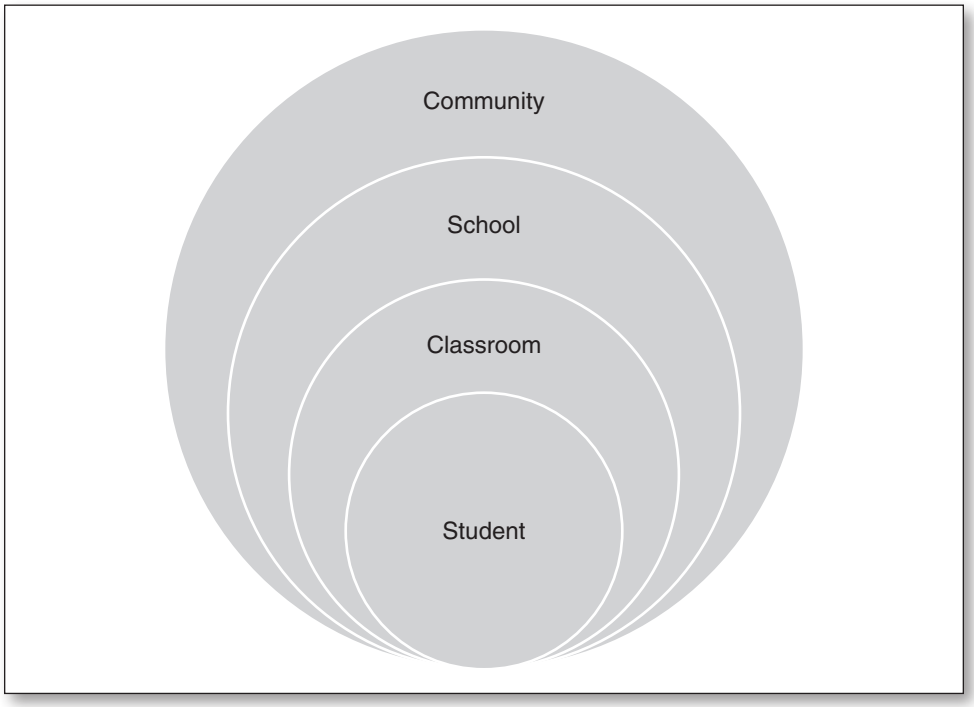


Figure 1.4 The Environment



responsibilities of the student to the teacher and the school. If students are exhibiting inappropriate behavior across a school, the schoolwide behavior system needs to be examined. The same holds true of a classroom. If most students in a classroom are struggling with learning a concept, rather than looking at each individual student as a separate entity, a look at the classroom instruction is needed.

The second implication embraces the concept that students' needs drive decision making. If a group of students is unsuccessful, the student group must be examined in comparison to other student groups for the purpose of identifying student needs. They may be compared to other students within the same class, or the class as a whole may be compared with other classes. This comparison is done to target the variable that may be determining success or lack of success. RTI does not allow for a group of students to remain unsuccessful and become known as the "difficult class." RTI prompts the questions, "Why is a particular group of students unsuccessful while others are experiencing success?" and "What data help explain that occurrence?"

RTI expects that some students will need additional supports and services beyond the core curriculum and general behavioral expectations.

Not all students will be successful with the core instruction. Some will need additional supports, and others will need additional challenges to show growth. While these statements seem obvious, RTI clearly communicates an expectation and acceptance of differences in students. Based on the 80% expectation of success, approximately 20% of students will need something in addition to the core curriculum and instruction. These students may need additional instruction, additional time for learning, or more intensity in the learning and instructional process. Behaviorally, these students may need a more tailored behavioral system in addition to the general classroom expectations and plan. For gifted students, there may be a need for additional enrichment or challenge. No matter what the need, RTI tells us that we cannot expect all students to always be successful with the core curriculum and instruction.

This principle extends the definition of quality instruction to include differentiated instruction as one component. It assures teachers that even with the best curriculum and highest-quality instruction in place, there will still be students who need more support in order to be successful. Simply stated, not all students will be successful all the time.

This is significant because the teacher no longer has to be all things to all students 100% of the time. This acknowledges the human factor and allows the teacher to admit to not being able to reach an individual in a particular area without feeling like a failure. A standard has been set

to recognize that there will be some students who will need more than the general education teacher, no matter how exemplary, is able to provide. This is a recognition of reality and not any failings on the part of the teacher.

A second strong factor is that the teacher must acknowledge when a practice is not working. If the pressure is taken off to expect 100% student success with instruction, then there is responsibility on the part of the teacher to acknowledge when instruction is not working. This requires data collection and communication. The teacher must be able to show what instruction was provided, how the typical students responded to that instruction, and then how a particular struggling student responded differently or not at all. The teacher is also responsible for communicating the needs of a student that go beyond what can be provided through the quality instruction at Tier 1. Once recognized, these needs cannot be pushed under the carpet; they need to be brought forward so that the additional supports and services can be put into place.

This principle also sets a standard for the teacher to recognize when large numbers of students are unsuccessful, and it expects the teacher to respond to that information. If 60% of a group of students are unsuccessful with the instruction, RTI processes examine the instruction as opposed to the students. As professionals, teachers must be diligent in reflecting on practices using valid and reliable sources and methods to determine instructional effectiveness. Instructional strategies that may have once been effective may not work for a certain population. Again, this does not implicate the teacher as an unsuccessful educator but instead as a true professional. A doctor is not considered unsuccessful because he or she has a sick patient. The doctor is only considered deficient if he or she does not respond to the illness. The same is true with teachers. Students who fail to learn something do not reflect failure on the part of a teacher as long as the teacher is willing to treat and acknowledge the failure by attempting to correct it.

RTI provides a process for decision making based on clear data for every student.

At the heart of RTI is the practice of using data to make decisions. These decisions involve both instructional supports and behavioral supports, the amount of supports to provide to a student as well as what the supports will look like, how intense the supports and services need to be, and what the supports and services themselves will look like. All of these decisions are based on data.

Data can be obtained in many forms: through observations as students work independently or in groups, through electronic response systems, and so on. Instructional strategies such as exit cards also can provide the needed data. However, data can also be collected more formally.

Standardized tests provide data to help make decisions. Summative assessments such as end-of-unit exams may provide useful data as well. Most often helpful is the use of formative assessments that are done regularly. These assessments and the results from progress monitoring data together can guide decision making.

The implications here are tied together. The first is that teachers need to examine data and become active collectors of data. The second is that, in many cases, teachers are already assessing students and possess a great deal of data needed as part of the instructional practice. Monitoring student progress is not a new concept. RTI tells us to continue this practice. While we may have used one source of data, or used the data for only one aspect of decision making, RTI requires data to be a central focus for all decisions.

RTI prescribes specific ways to look at the student data when using these data for decision making. One way RTI encourages examining data is by reflecting on trends as a whole. These may be trends of a district, a school, a grade level, a classroom, a group of students, or an individual. Looking at trends enables needs to become more apparent, and connections that may not have been seen before are made. Trend examination also allows educators to discuss rates of learning and levels of mastery. This becomes pivotal when addressing the needs of a struggling learner. RTI also encourages examining data in relation to clearly stated expectations. By establishing a level of expectation, an aim line provides a reference point for any data. Finally, RTI directs educators to examine data in relation to other learners not just on standardized testing but on a more frequent level. Data reflecting the level of understanding in response to instruction can be compared from one student who has received the instruction to another student who has received the same instruction.

By using data for comparisons and trend analysis, the teacher's emphasis on data in the classroom shifts from simply a student's level of mastery on a particular concept to the classroom itself, the environment, the curriculum, and the instruction, as well as the learners. Data examined in this way open the door to additional probing in order to establish needs. For instance, if a whole group of students in a particular class are struggling in a certain aspect, the data suggest that the curriculum or instruction is in need of change, rather than the students. On the other hand, if a student shows performance well below his or her peers and has received the same instruction as peers, the data suggest looking more deeply at that individual student's need. Data examined by looking at trends can also suggest when environmental factors may be coming into play. For instance, data may show that large numbers of students perform poorly on Friday afternoons in comparison to other days or other times of day. Rather than looking at isolated scores or data from a particular student, RTI prompts a

further and broader examination of data. Besides the details, a big picture can be painted through the use of data.

RTI requires continuous progress monitoring and formative assessments to drive instruction.

When determining the degree of success that a student is experiencing, RTI strongly emphasizes the need to go beyond gut instincts and instinctive decision making. Throughout history, educators have not always been accurate in identifying certain student qualities and yet have used these gut instincts to make instructional decisions and even initiate processes to label students based on intuition. RTI requires instructional and educational decisions to be based on data. For the past 20 years, progress monitoring and data collection efforts have been recognized as effective practice (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006).

In RTI, decision making is done constantly through a model of clear steps that include identifying a problem, creating a hypothesis about why the problem exists, implementing an intervention, and then monitoring the effects of that intervention. This monitoring is done through the use of data and becomes a key component. If something is not working, it does not continue unnoticed and unaddressed.

At all tiers, data from assessment provide the stage for understanding student needs and responding to those needs. Screening assessment data provides a big picture and is used to get an idea of how a student or group of students is doing overall in comparison to others or a norm. It is a snapshot and acts as a thermometer to potentially provide a quick measure of levels of success and need (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009). These screening assessments may be formal or informal in nature and are often summative assessments, indicating what the student has already learned or can do. Diagnostic data provide more specific information and are used to pinpoint targeted areas of strength or need. These assessments also take on a variety of formats and are administered to gain more specific insight. Diagnostics require cause-effect thinking about both teacher and student performance: "If a student does X, I will respond with this" or "If I use this for an instructional method, the student will do X" (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004). Certainly, this is at the heart of RTI.

One hallmark of RTI is the practice of systematic progress monitoring. This too requires the same cause-effect thinking as does diagnostic assessment. Progress monitoring is the careful and consistent collection of data for the purpose of identifying trends, patterns, and rates of learning. There are several reasons to use progress monitoring. One important reason is that the data will reflect the effectiveness of instruction and indicate whether strategies are working (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2009). Another reason is so that parents and students can

see progress. Students who are aware of their progress are more likely to work harder in order to make gains toward goals (Safer & Fleischman, 2005). A final reason is that progress monitoring is done frequently so that changes to instruction are implemented in timely and more effective ways. Progress monitoring leads to more timely responsiveness to instruction. Progress monitoring is also tied to formative assessment: the collection of data for the purpose of instructional decision making. It is intended to *form* instruction and not just *inform.* Together, progress monitoring and formative assessment provide the information and guide the decision-making processes of instruction.

RTI requires the continuous collection of data in order to determine student progress. Data is collected for students as individuals, for a classroom as a whole, and even for an entire grade level. Data are reflected on in order to identify trends and patterns in student performance. Beyond the need for continuous progress monitoring, RTI demands that instructional decisions be based on student performance data rather than instinct-based, one-time assessments or assumptions about a student or group of students. Data from progress monitoring and formative assessments drive decision-making practices.

RTI responds to learner needs when they are recognized and involves intervention that comes without labels.

In relation to the last principle, RTI emphasizes early intervention. This means that interventions occur immediately when a need is recognized and not just after testing processes and labels are assigned. RTI emphasizes the urgency to provide supports and services to any student who needs them when the need arises rather than only when a student "qualifies" for additional services. In the past, we provided additional supports and services after a student was referred and identified as qualifying for special education services. Those students who had a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability were provided with supports and services through the special education process and were ensured these services through an IEP. Students who had a significantly low IQ score also were provided supports and services through special education. Students who did not fall into one of those two categories were left to chance in hopes that a teacher would recognize needs and meet those needs within the daily instruction. The RTI model ensures that all students receive supports and services if it is clear that there is a need. A student does not have to wait for the often lengthy process of referral for evaluations, followed by evaluations and a possible label in the special education system, before receiving the help needed. RTI moves us from a "wait to fail" model to a responsive and active model. Now, IDEIA allows an approach to identification that can be made by looking at whether a child responds to research-based interventions as expected by defensible research. This requires the

teacher to be constantly monitoring and assessing students in order to determine these needs.

This is one of the most significant changes in educational practices from the past. Instead of a model in which the goal was to give a struggling student a label, now the goal is to give the struggling learner the needed services and supports. Instead of asking "What is wrong with this student?" the question becomes "What can we do to support the student's performance and help promote success?" Time and efforts are directed toward what we can do to help rather than what we can find wrong. Although individualized testing may still be done within RTI, the purpose is to gain more information about the student's thinking processes. This takes priority over efforts to qualify the student to receive a label and then, in turn, receive supports and services.

Another strong implication for the teacher is that RTI requires collaboration and joint effort for achieving success. All students are everyone's responsibility. It is expected that general education teachers, special education teachers, and teachers from multiple content areas will work together to meet the needs of each student. Collaboration becomes a requirement. While collaboration does present challenges, such as finding time, there are great advantages to professionals coming together to bring in an array of expertise (Murawski, 2005). Teachers have exhausting demands placed on them in terms of curriculum and instruction. They have been expected to be both content area experts as well as experts in instructional strategies and practices. RTI demands differentiated instruction by teachers yet now also expects them to collaborate with other professionals in order to meet student needs.

RTI strives to go beyond students making some gains to students making accelerated gains at a rate that will allow them to not fall further behind.

Over the past decade or more, the educational system has focused on measuring student achievement in terms of growth as compared from one year to the next. If a student reflected on assessments that he or she was making gains, there was no more that needed to be done. RTI, along with other accountability initiatives, change that. Now student growth is viewed in terms of the amount of growth over a period of time. The pace at which a student is making gains has become as important as whether he or she is making gains. When a student struggles and falls further behind, it is even more essential to collect data in order to monitor the learning rate. The further behind a student is, the faster the student needs to learn in order to catch up. This is done by supplementing the core instruction with additional supports and services rather than supplanting the core instruction. In that supplemental support, the goal is not just to maintain the current rate at which the student is learning but to actually accelerate the learning for the student to catch up to peers.

In the past, remediation services functioned to replace the core instruction in many cases. A student received different instruction than his or her peers. This often increased gaps in the student's achievement levels as compared to his or her peers. Even if learning reflected progress, it was often at the same rate as peers, and therefore the gap was maintained. Progress was monitored and success was defined as a student showing gains in performance.

RTI redefines success as student performance that reflects accelerated gains, at a pace more rapid than peers, for the purpose of shrinking the gap between the struggling student's performance and that of peers. This acceleration is the purpose for the increased intensity and implementation of supports and services. The underlying principle is that a student will be able to achieve more if strategic, systematic research-based supports and services are in place and matched to the learner. For instance, if a particular student is struggling in vocabulary and another group of students is learning at a rate of four new words per week, in order to catch up the struggling student needs to learn the four that the peers are learning as well as additional words. Based on the rates of learning and how far behind the student is in relation to peers, the number of additional words per week can be determined. The expectation is that with additional supports, the student can learn more than his or her peers in the same period of time in order to be back on the same level with the peers.

This concept raises great levels of discussion around the expectations of students and learning. For those teachers who say that it is unrealistic to expect a struggling learner to learn at a rate faster than peers who are not struggling, there is one question to be asked: Can the student ever have a chance to catch up to peers and close the gap any other way? In the past, we maintained the struggling student's position in relation to peers by supplanting instruction. For instance, the student may have learned four different words than the peers. Even at the rate of four words per week, if there has been a gap, a gap will remain. If, however, the student learned the four words per week that the peers were learning and was supported with learning those four with additional supports to learn an additional two words per week through the more intensive services received, it is possible for the gap to close. Without this approach, it is not possible to close the gap. There has been talk in education for a long time about closing the achievement gap, and now here is where the rubber meets the road. RTI makes the change needed for the gap to ever have a possibility of being closed.

RTI includes aspects beyond the instructional time and considers the student as a whole child.

This principle reflects the changing times in our educational system. It breaks down the barriers of a learning environment as being contained

within four walls. It recognizes that learning happens in all settings and in all parts of a student's life. This principle also reflects the relationship of schools with community and resources beyond the school building. It stems from the outreach that now exists between homes, schools, and community organizations and businesses. RTI addresses the whole child and, in doing so, opens the door for a bigger picture of the student.

In the past, educators were cautious to draw lines between the services provided within the school and those funded through outside sources. In meetings in the past, little consideration was given for any additional supports or services that a student was receiving outside of the public educational system. This was, in large part, due to funding issues. A public school could only address areas in which the public school received funding.

Now, when considering the supports and services of a student, educators can look beyond what is happening in the classroom. Before- and afterschool programs, tutoring programs, and other supports can be discussed and considered as avenues to help support student success. The perspective has shifted from an 8:30–3:30 lens to a 24/7 one. Educators look at the whole child rather than just what occurs within the school day.

RTI requires collaboration not only with educational professionals but also with a variety of other people as well. If supports from the outside are going to be most beneficial to a student, they need to be streamlined and seamless. All stakeholders should have common goals and be moving in the same direction. Teachers will need to communicate and collaborate with outside tutors, afterschool programs, and even private tutoring businesses. Together, information and data can be shared. Progress can be tracked in order to identify both growth and effectiveness of the services. RTI creates a demand for collaboration not just within the educational system and school building but with the outside community as well.

This principle also implies that problem solving becomes a shared responsibility and not one solely placed on the teacher. Parents and others involved in a student's education are all involved in the supports as well as the monitoring and problem solving. A teacher is no longer isolated in responsibility for a student's education. RTI acknowledges and honors the old saying that it takes a village to raise a child. Indeed, it supports and reinforces that idea.

SUMMARY

RTI is a systematic framework designed to provide students with the supports and services needed in order to be successful in the classroom. While there still remain some inconsistencies within RTI, there are also some guiding principles in common to all RTI practices. Each of these principles has direct application and impact on the classroom teacher.

Central to the framework is a classroom that provides consistent, research-based, high-quality instruction. From here, all decisions regarding supports and services evolve from the responsiveness of the student to the curriculum and instruction. These decisions are also systematic and driven by data and evidence. RTI touches on almost all other educational initiatives and supports the central premise that the students themselves are at the heart of education.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How is the process of RTI similar to what has been done in the past to support student needs? How is this process new and different in its approach?
- When considering the framework of RTI, about which aspects can you say, "I already do that"? What evidence do you have that reflects this?
- How do you see the framework being different for behavior than for academics?
- How do you see students identified as gifted fitting into this framework?
- Where do you see overlap between behavior and academics?
- What strengths do you see in using the RTI framework within the educational system?
- What challenges do you see presented by this framework?
- Which principles of RTI do you feel most strongly about?