

# Introduction

## PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

*The Complete Guide to RTI* offers a toolkit of resources for introducing response to intervention (RTI) to professional educators in K–12 schools and to teacher candidates in colleges and universities. A growing library of monographs on the topic is available, which raises the question of why a new book on RTI is needed. The answer lies in recent political developments impacting American schools, in particular, the strong federal recommendation that all schools adopt RTI as part of their general and special education programs:

Consensus reports and empirical syntheses indicate a need for major changes in the approach to identifying children with SLD. Models that incorporate RTI represent a shift in special education toward goals of better achievement and improved behavioral outcomes for children with SLD. (Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities, *71 Federal Register*, 46647, 2006, codified at 34 CFR 300)

Influences on the way curriculum is taught in American schools are escalating, coming from educational, political, scientific, business, and professional spheres, and driven by forces at national, state, and local levels. They impact teaching and learning in much the same way that health care legislation is changing the practice of medicine. In light of this, a reform as fundamental as RTI should not be introduced as solely a new, “scientifically based” teaching technique, to be learned, practiced, and applied in the classroom. It has been aptly described as a sea change and paradigm shift (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008), and it is poised to usher in the most consequential alteration in American schooling since the shift from curriculum-centered to child-centered learning in the 1960s.

When a school adopts RTI, it changes its basis for making instructional decisions from reliance on past practice, training, experience, and

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professional expertise to reliance on a formal, scientifically based model of practice based on data gathering and systematic problem solving.

The way we introduce this new form of practice to professional educators needs to be configured accordingly: It needs to be presented not as a new educational program with content that needs to be learned, but as a different way of looking at the practice of education, a new *method* for using the vast array of educational techniques that are available to professionals. RTI does not provide the educational interventions that will help students learn; it provides a method for deciding when an intervention is working and when it needs to be changed. The difference between a school that uses RTI and one that does not is in the standard for deciding whether an intervention is successful. In traditional settings, the standard has been the judgment of professionals, based on their experience and expertise; within RTI, the standard is the evidence of data.

This is the same scientific method that guides practice in fields as diverse as medical research, psychotherapy, and clinical psychology (Clark & Alvarez, 2010). It seeks to standardize the basis for decision making in areas such as a child's success in specific areas of learning, causes of and responses to inappropriate behavior, and whether or not a child should be classified as in need of special education services. Under RTI, decisions of this type, which were previously made on the basis of past practice and policy, are made according to a systematic, scientifically based process similar to that used, for example, by the FDA to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of a new medication (Tilly, 2002). RTI needs to be presented to professionals as a *method* for educational decision making, not as a new body of content for educational practice.

### **DESIGN OF THE BOOK**

This book is designed to be a hands-on resource for educators and others in the educational community who work within the day-to-day pressures of the current changes in American education leading toward scientific, data-based instruction.

### **Coping With a Paradigm Shift in Education**

Depending on one's disposition, the pressures of change may be challenging or threatening, but they are never easy. Since the advent of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, developments in areas such as technology, accountability, and data gathering have been fast, scattered, confusing, and unpredictable. (Note: Congress passed NCLB in December of 2001, and President Bush signed it in January of 2002. Throughout

this book, we will refer to its passage with the more commonly used date of 2001.) Many professionals, particularly the young, may see this as a rare opportunity. Others will see a decline from stability to uncertainty.

According to Robert Harvey, both views are correct; the differences lie in the individual's perception of change: "The new technology has been pulverizing big business. . . . Optimism and pessimism are code words for how we deal with change" (Harvey, 1995, p. 189). Max Planck, the iconic 20th-century physicist, gave a description of how these pressures operate in the field of science: "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light. Rather, it must grow until its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is able to understand it" (1949, pp. 33–34).

We can't wait for a generation of educators to retire before RTI becomes fully accepted. But Planck's experience ought to lead us toward a practical starting point: The most effective introduction of RTI should be directed toward a new generation of teachers and educational leaders—whether they be novice or veteran—and it needs to be presented as a transformational, rather than incremental, change in educational practice.

### **An Approach to Meeting the Changes Ahead**

In light of the changes that educators face, the book is based on four foundations:

1. *A focus on the technology.* The text is permeated with references to instructional technology that provide a basis for future instruction and professional development within RTI. Each chapter includes annotated online resources leading to further study in the topics presented.

2. *A broad collaborative base of contributor expertise, demonstrating the wide range of RTI applications.* Contributor expertise includes early childhood, childhood, and middle and secondary school research; college and university teacher education; educational policy development; clinical services; educational psychology; professional organizations; school leadership; and parent advocacy. Applications of RTI are organized into four areas: (a) *foundations*, including its educational and political history, as well as its scientific and data-driven approach in both general and special education, (b) *content area applications*, including reading, literacy, mathematics, positive behavior support, and school administration, (c) *the use of technology* in teaching RTI skills and in applying RTI in classroom settings, and (d) *collaboration among professional and nonprofessional stakeholders* in the introduction of RTI, including parents, students, and communities.

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3. *A hands-on, results-oriented focus on teacher preparation for RTI in both general and special education.* With the accompanying technology resources, the book is designed as both an *introduction* to the historical, political, and educational foundations of RTI and a rich *resource* for teaching RTI as a required skill in the years ahead. In an October 22, 2009, speech, Education Secretary Arne Duncan described the need to reform the way we prepare future teachers:

Teachers say two things about their training in teacher education schools. First, most of them say they did not get the hands-on practical teacher training about managing the classroom that they needed, especially for high-needs students. And second, they say they were not taught how to use data to differentiate and improve instruction and boost student learning. (Duncan, 2009)

*The Complete Guide to RTI* responds to both of these challenges. It takes into account recent state and federal department of education policies that mandate scientific justification of instruction and adherence to the peer review standards of research science. RTI is not presented dogmatically, as a fixed body of knowledge or as a skill for aspiring teachers to simply learn and put into practice. It has had scientifically proven success in a variety of local applications, but it will need to grow, adapt, and be enhanced as it is applied on a national scale. Case studies throughout the book provide context for the application of RTI principles to local school practice.

4. *Linkage of the book's content to foreseeable developments in state and national educational policy.* One of the most controversial aspects of the current paradigm shift toward RTI is the increasing role of state and federal agencies in enforcing standards for schools that have traditionally thought of themselves as locally controlled. In this process, RTI has come to embody policies that mandate scientific and data-driven educational standards in virtually every state. These requirements are emphasized in the area of teacher preparation. The secretary of education has announced a national agenda that some have found inspiring, and others deeply disturbing:

America's university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change—not evolutionary tinkering. But I am optimistic that, despite the obstacles to reform, the seeds of real change have been planted. . . . Real change, based upon the real outcomes of children—revolutionary, isn't it? (Duncan, 2009)

Whatever one's response to the changes underway, the data-driven and progress monitoring strategies presented throughout the chapters will help teachers to examine the outcome of their work in terms of student response. This book is designed to keep in-service teachers aware that what they are learning about RTI is not education as usual, but is instead the leading edge of changes that are, in the words of America's top educator, "revolutionary"—and to prepare preservice teachers for the educational environment they are entering.