RTI: What It Is and How the TN-State Improvement Grant Responded

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which high-quality reading instruction intersects with the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. This combination will meet the needs of beginning readers, provide additional support to struggling learners, and help identify students with specific learning disabilities as described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004. As the state of Tennessee has moved to implement RTI, many school districts have turned to the Tennessee State Improvement Grant (TN-SIG)—an Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)-funded project administered through the state's department of education (TN DOE)—for support. This paper will also outline the TN DOE's current policies related to the implementation of the RTI approach.

After an extensive study with experts, stakeholders, and testimonies from individuals, The National Reading Panel emphasized the "complexity of reading instruction."

The National Reading Panel: High-quality Reading Instruction

In 1997, the U.S. Congress established the National Reading Panel to evaluate what was then the current knowledge of research-based reading interventions and their practical effects on children learning to read (Danielson, 2006). Consisting of 14 experts and stakeholders—who over the course of two years reviewed the available reading research—the panel heard testimony from 125 individuals during a series of public hearings and consulted with educational organizations involved in reading instruction. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ensuing report emphasized the complexity of reading instruction. A typical

elementary school classroom comprises students with a wide variety of ability levels and school preparedness. Additionally, teachers possess various degrees of expertise when it comes to reading instruction. The panel, though acknowledging that no single approach is conducive to every circumstance, nevertheless concluded that five components are crucial to the development of reading skills:

• Phonemic awareness - the ability to listen to, identify, and manipulate phonemes, the smallest units of sounds that are combined to create words

• Phonics and word study - instruction designed to teach students the relationship between sounds and written letters and thus how to decode and read written words

• Vocabulary - a knowledge of words and their meanings

•Fluency - the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and expression

• Comprehension - the ability to understand what one has read (NIH, 2000).

One outcome of the panel's finding is that increasing numbers of teachers now incorporating these components into their reading instruction. The National Reading

Panel used scientific based research methods to arrive at the above conclusions.

Scientifically Based Reading Research

Scientifically based reading research uses systematic and objective procedures to gain reliable and valid evidence about reading instruction, interventions, and programs. The National Reading Panel designed this research study in such a way that it can be replicated (U. S. Department of Education, Early Intervening Services/ Response to Intervention [RTI].

Some critics—noting that many students with SLD can struggle for years before demonstrating a discrepancy great enough to trigger eligibility for special education services—referred to this process as a "wait-to-fail"

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and Response to Intervention (RTI)

With research as a guide, effective methods for providing early reading support to students should be implemented, including those students suspected of having a learning disability. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) is a federal law governing the education of students with disabilities in the United States. Until the most recent reauthorization in 2004, students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) were

identified using a method known as the IQ/achievement discrepancy model. In order for a student to qualify for special education services under this model, a discrepancy must be documented between that student's scores of intellectual ability (i.e., IQ) and his or her academic achievement test scores.

IDEA 2004, conversely, allows the use of an alternate process to identify students with specific learning disability (SLD), one that involves regularly monitoring a student's academic response to provide support early through increasingly intensive levels (or tiers) of scientifically based intervention (IDEA, 2004, §300.307[a][2]).

RTI typically involves:

- **Primary intervention (Tier 1)** High-quality instruction is provided to students.
- **Secondary intervention (Tier 2)**: Students who are identified as struggling learners receive additional, small-group intervention.
- **Tertiary intervention (Tier 3)**: Intensive, individualized instruction is provided for students who need greater supports than those provided at the secondary-intervention level.

Though the most common approach to RTI—similar to the conceptual model for positive behavioral support—has three tiers, other approaches incorporate four or more. Regardless, students who fail to make adequate academic gains, even with the more intensive interventions provided at Tiers 2 and 3, may have learning disabilities. These students may be eligible for special education services. As a further refinement, IDEA 2004 stipulates that school personnel demonstrate high quality instruction. Documentation must assure that the student has not made progress simply because of a lack of instruction (IDEA, 2004, §300.309[b][1]).

IDEA 2004 requires that repeated assessments of academic achievement be conducted at reasonable intervals, and that the data collected be used to evaluate student progress (IDEA 2004, §300.309[b][2]), a method of assessment referred to as *progress monitoring*.

There are several reasons why teachers must understand and utilize progress monitoring. First, educators can determine the extent to which a student is making progress in a particular area (e.g., reading). A benchmark or pre-established criteria (e.g., Performance Level or Rate of Growth) displayed below

indicates the level of performance that students should achieve. These pre-established criteria can then be used to assess student progress. Second, progress monitoring yields observable and measurable data that can be depicted in a graph for ease of interpretation, allowing teachers, parents, and students to determine whether the student is progressing adequately. Third, school personnel can use the progress monitoring data to determine whether the majority of the students in the class are meeting the benchmark. If they are, it can be assumed that high-quality instruction was provided. Conversely, if the majority of the students in the classroom fail to meet the relevant progress monitoring benchmark, it may be assumed that adequate instruction was lacking.

Performance Level or Rate of Growth

Performance level is an indication of a student's academic skills, usually denoted by a score on a given test or probe. The rate of growth (or slope) is an indication of how much a student's reading skills have improved, based on an assessment of a student's scores overtime. Many school districts use computer generated programs to calculate the performance level and growth.

Instruction, interventions, and data collection must all be implemented with *fidelity*—that is, in a manner consistent with the research that validates effectiveness. Teachers who take it upon themselves to modify interventions previously established by research risk diluting—or even negating—those interventions' effectiveness. Implementation fidelity is a crucial element of high-quality instruction and, unfortunately, is often over looked.

Because of this, many incorrectly believe that RTI is solely a special education process. However, the RTI process also guarantees that intervention be provided to students as soon as data indicate that they are struggling. This immediate intervention (i.e., the lower tiers) can prevent future academic problems.

The process works like this: At the beginning of the school year, a universal screening measure is used to identify students who may have reading difficulties. All students are briefly evaluated using a screening tool (e.g., a brief reading probe). Most students in a class will experience success with this level of instruction. Those students identified by the universal screening as being at risk for reading failure

receive progress monitoring, preferably once per week, for four to six weeks.

Teachers use the progress monitoring data to determine whether the student is making adequate progress, or whether he or she would benefit from more intensive instruction. In many cases, the data show that these students spontaneously recover; their reading skills improve as Tier 1 reading instruction remediates their skills.

In Tier 1, high-quality reading instruction is provided to all students.

However, some students do not show sufficient gains to meet end-of-the-year benchmarks. In such cases, Tier 2 instruction provides additional intensive support **while students continue to receive Tier 1 services.** Trained personnel (e.g., a reading specialist, literacy coach, or general education teacher) may deliver interventions at this tier in the general education classroom to small groups of three to five students.

This small-group instruction allows teachers to provide more frequent instructional feedback and to create additional opportunities for practice and supplemental instruction. In all cases, Tier 1 and Tier 2 instructors collaborate to supplement and support the instruction. The duration of Tier 2 can vary between nine and twenty weeks,

depending on the guidelines established by the school or district.

Regardless of the amount of time allocated for Tier 2 intervention, the student's skills are monitored frequently to determine whether the student is:

- Making sufficient gains to remove the Tier 2 and proceed only with Tier 1 instruction
- Responding to the interventions but has not yet reached grade-level equivalency and would benefit from a second round of Tier 2 instruction
- Requiring additional intensive intervention at Tier 3.
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Figure 1. Graphic Representation of RTI Tiers
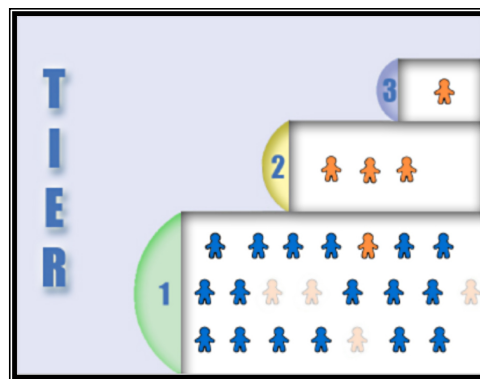
Through the provision of the high-quality instruction of Tier 1—combined with the additional intensive intervention in Tier 2—

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the RTI process prevents future academic problems for many students.

The RTI Connection to Special Education

Tier 3 intervention services are provided to students whose response to Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction is insufficient. Students in Tier 3 receive intensive intervention from specialists with particular expertise in instructional interventions. In Tier 3, the amount of intervention is increased, the intervention is provided individually or in small groups with a student/ teacher ratio of no more than 1:3, and students' progress is frequently monitored.

 In some schools, students who receive Tier 3 services may be identified as having a disability and qualify for special education services. In these cases, the special educator provides the Tier 3 intervention, while other schools may consider Tier 3 services to fall under general education. In such instances, a reading specialist or other expert provides the intervention. Regardless of where special education falls within the RTI framework, students must qualify for special education services. Eligibility information is gathered through an individualized, comprehensive evaluation that includes—but cannot be limited to—the student's progress monitoring data.

Tennessee State Improvement Grant responds to the National RTI Requirements

In anticipation of providing Tennessee teachers with knowledge of and training in RTI, the TN-SIG—an initiative developed, in part, to identify and disseminate scientifically research-based practices that support literacy skills—partnered with the IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University to develop a series of online instructional modules about RTI. Funding for this effort was supported by the TN-SIG and by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

The RTI module series consists of six interactive modules, including two supplemental modules on progress monitoring. Additional modules explore various ways that the RTI approach is used as early intervention services for struggling readers. RTI modules also are used as tools to identify students with learning disabilities in the early grades. Figure 2 depicts the module sequence recommended for teachers and school leaders.

Figure 2. The IRIS Module Sequence
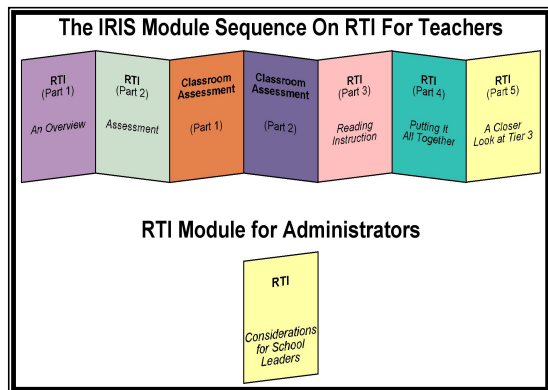
- **RTI (Part 1): An Overview**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti01_overview/chalcycle.htm provides an overview of the RTI approach and includes a brief synopsis of each tier.

 RTI (Part 2): Assessment
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti02_assessment/chalcycle.htm discusses in detail the universal screening and progress monitoring procedures used in each tier of the RTI approach. It highlights the importance of using the data to determine whether a student is meeting academic goals or whether more intensive intervention is needed.

- **Classroom Assessment (Part 1): An Introduction to Monitoring Academic Achievement in the Classroom**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/gpm/chalcycle.htm illustrates how progress monitoring can influence the academic outcomes of students and demonstrates how to implement curriculum-based measurement with a classroom of students.

- **Classroom Assessment (Part 2): Evaluating Reading Progress**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti_leaders/chalcycle.htm depicts the assessment procedures integral to RTI and outlines how to use progress monitoring data to determine whether a student is meeting the established performance criteria or whether more intensive interventions are needed.

- **RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti03_reading/chalcycle.htm illustrates the essential components of high-quality reading instruction and demonstrates the difference in the skills of good and struggling readers.

- **(Part 4): Putting It All Together**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti04_alltogether/chalcycle.htm illustrates how to combine the information learned in RTI Parts 1, 2, and 3 to effectively use the RTI approach in the classroom.

- **(Part 5): Closer Look at Tier 3**
http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti05_tier3/chalcycle.htm Part 5 describes Tier 3 reading interventions and how they differ from those at Tiers 1 and 2, discusses

assessing students' responses to individualized intervention, and addresses parent communication and issues related to English language learners.

• **RTI: Considerations for School Leaders**

http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/rti_leaders/chalcycle.htm provides information about ways to build support for RTI, factors that should be addressed when implementing RTI individual support, and methods of collecting data and evaluating the effectiveness of the RTI approach at the school level. After working closely with the developers of the RTI module series, the TN Department of Education (DOE) conducted several RTI training workshops for school superintendents, school directors, field-service coordinators, family service providers, faculty from higher education, and state department personnel.

Trainees were introduced to the Idea and Research for Inclusive Settings (IRIS) Modules and instructed on the effective use the modules for training purposes. The TN DOE identified school districts and counties that were ready to begin implementing the RTI approach and provided additional training, as needed.

In addition to supporting the IRIS Modules, the TN DOE took further steps to guide school districts implementing or preparing to implement RTI. In 2007, the department commissioned the TN RTI Oversight Committee of Stakeholders to develop policy and guidance for school districts. The RTI Committee served to inform Tennessee's LD standards and to provide informational resources for district administrators to use for developing RTI templates and guidelines (see Appendix A). The TN DOE has seen a steady increase in district RTI implementation, particularly since the State Board's approval of its Specific Learning Disability Standards, revised in December 2007 and included a response to intervention method of evaluation http://state.tn.us/sbe/Nov07/VJ_SpecificLrngDisabilities_Eligibility_Std.pdf.

The state also initiated a school readiness assessment to assist personnel in identifying RTI processes, such as progress monitoring, that are already being implemented in schools, and to direct the establishment of future goals related to RTI implementation. The TN DOE recommends that schools Division of Special Education, 2007):

• Conduct an assessment of the system's readiness to use an RTI model.

- Examine the reading programs already in use to determine whether they include the five essential components of reading instruction.
- Understand the multi-tiered approach to instruction.
- Establish a school-wide student assistance/ intervention/ collaborative team.
- Focus on grades K–3 and reading to begin the RTI process.
- Study scheduling and school resources with the school-wide intervention team.
- Conduct training on progress monitoring.
- Conduct training on differentiated instruction.
- Submit RTI Plan to the TN DOE
- Conceptualize RTI by adopting a continue-to-learn model.
- Compare what was learned after one-year of RTI implementation with the original RTI plans.
- Continue to follow current research and best practices on RTI.

Conclusion

The RTI process combines effective practices such as universal screening, high-quality instruction, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making in an approach that promotes success for all students. The RTI process can prevent reading difficulties by providing additional supports as soon as data indicates that a student is struggling. Furthermore, the RTI approach is used to assist in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities.

Technology Support

In addition to the IRIS Modules, the Tennessee State Department of Education has developed a multitude of supports for schools and districts that want to implement RTI:

http://sig.cls.utk.edu/resources_teacherpd.html, and TN DOE
http://tennessee.gov/education/

Tennessee Department Of Education Policy and Guidelines

- Template for RTI Guidelines
  http://state.tn.us/education/speced/doc/10509rtiguidelines.pdf

- RTI Process Decision Tree
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/21709RTITree.pdf

- Questions and Answers on Response to Intervention (RTI) and Early Intervening
  Services (EIS) from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and
  Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/82108FAQsOSEP_RTI.pdf

- New Criteria for Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities Training Power Point
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/New_Crit_ID_SpecLrg.pdf

- RTI Planning Checklist
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/101308RTIchecklist.pdf

- RTI School Readiness for Implementation
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/101008seconf07.pdf

- Getting Started – Hardeman County
  http://tennessee.gov/education/speced/doc/101008HardemanCo.pdf

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