

# Effective Leadership in an RTI World

*What Every School Administrator Needs to Know  
About Successfully Implementing Response  
to Intervention Through  
Differentiated Instruction*



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# Effective Leadership in an RTI World

## *What Every School Administrator Needs to Know About Successfully Implementing Response to Intervention Through Differentiated Instruction*

### A Quick Review of the Basics

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, a powerful new element, stressing that prevention-focused instructional practices be used in the regular education classroom, was added to the law. These Early Intervening Services (EIS) benefit at-risk students who have not been identified for special education but clearly require additional academic and behavioral support in order to succeed. The idea that early intervention is more effective than later remediation is supported by multiple long-term studies.

Awareness of these new requirements is growing, but many educators are still asking, “What services should be made available? Which students should get them? How do we organize this process and make informed decisions?” That’s what Response to Intervention (RTI) is all about. RTI is the framework schools use to structure EIS and also the process used to determine if a student should be evaluated for special education services. Although no specific RTI model is detailed in the law, the purpose of the initiative is clear. Schools must have systems in place to ensure that:

- a comprehensive, universal screening process is administered to all students to identify those at risk and guide instructional decisions
- responsive, expert-driven instruction is practiced in the regular education classroom to support struggling learners
- prescriptive, research-based academic or behavioral interventions are provided to at-risk students
- each student’s response to intervention and instruction is carefully monitored and adjusted accordingly
- students consistently failing to respond to interventions of increasing intensity can be referred for a comprehensive special education evaluation—a proactive alternative to the IQ-achievement discrepancy model used in the past



## Effective Leadership Is Everything

RTI is a significant change that affects the entire education system in a state, a district, and an individual building. The successful implementation of an RTI framework in your school will not happen without thoughtful, long-term, proactive leadership. As a key decision maker, you have to understand where you're going and why before you initiate significant changes. And you must actively prepare yourself to lead colleagues smoothly through this paradigm shift. Let's take a look at several key issues leaders must consider:

### The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDE) describes RTI as a practice of:

- ▶ providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need
- ▶ monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals
- ▶ applying child response data to important educational decisions

1. RTI is the process described in IDEA for structuring EIS. It is also the right thing to do on behalf of learners. Numerous long-term studies support the effectiveness of early intervention. Your commitment to this process—one that brings such benefits to students—must not waiver. Careful preparation will allow you to stay the course with confidence.
2. Guiding and sustaining an organization during a long-term period of major transition requires a very specialized skill set. Building your personal expertise in strategic planning, quality management, and organizational leadership is absolutely essential as you lead your staff on this journey.
3. Establishing an effective RTI framework requires extensive collaboration as you move from brainstorming and planning to executing and revising the process. You may find that your initial implementation plan will change as you and your staff become more comfortable and savvy. It is vital that you have tools, techniques, and procedures in your professional repertoire to facilitate all these processes efficiently.
4. As an instructional leader in your school, you set the tone by establishing the conditions necessary to facilitate an effective RTI framework. You, therefore, must learn all you can about topics central to RTI, including differentiated instruction, practical ways to make data-driven decisions, evidence-based best practices, effective but simple documentation tools, and research-based strategies and materials.
5. The transformation in routines, roles, data analysis, documentation, and teaching practices required under RTI will be difficult and stressful for some members of your staff. Recognizing this and determining thoughtful ways to overcome reluctance and apprehension before they arise will help you move forward more smoothly. You must also be prepared to work with colleagues who overtly resist the changes and expectations for EIS stemming from the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA.
6. As a leader and decision maker, your top priority should be to ensure the consistent use of differentiated instruction (DI) in every classroom. Why? Because classroom educators are the first line of early intervention, and DI is the responsive, expert-driven, student-centered instruction required under RTI.

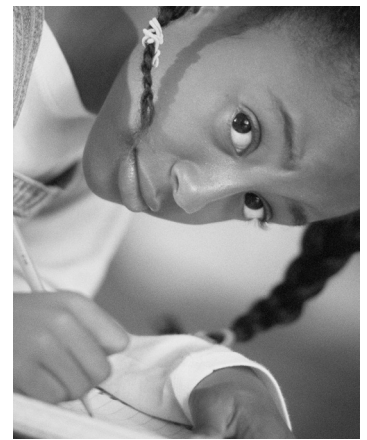
## DI Is the Essential Foundation

Ultimately, DI should be an expectation, not a suggestion. But getting to that point takes time, dialogue, and thoughtful preparation. Letting learners fall through the cracks is simply not an option. Teachers must master more sophisticated instructional techniques to accommodate a diverse array of student needs, readiness levels, interests, and attitudes. This can be accomplished through skillful and consistent use of differentiated instruction in the regular education classroom. DI requires a new mind-set and a new skill set for many teachers and administrators.

The DI–RTI connection is undeniable. Because classroom teachers are the first line of intervention under RTI, all staff development and school improvement efforts should focus on building competency in DI. The foundation of student-centered instruction and classroom intervention efforts includes:

- pre-assessment options to guide instruction
- regular opportunities for students to work in whole groups, small groups, with a partner, or independently
- mini-lessons and different levels of scaffolding or support as needed
- tiered assignments to fit student needs based on readiness
- instructional strategies that result in active engagement
- opportunities for choice and flexibility
- books and instructional materials at different levels of complexity
- plans to accommodate varied pacing
- activity stations that demonstrate awareness of different academic needs and learning style preferences
- computer programs or websites to meet learners' needs
- a variety of assessment options that allow students to demonstrate their mastery of new concepts, content, and skills
- relevant extension options for learners who need additional challenges

The emphasis in RTI is literacy, math, and behavior, but remember that teachers of social studies, science, music, art, physical education, technology, and other special subjects have just as many opportunities to differentiate and support learners. The same expectations for staff development and the daily use of DI should extend to them, too!



*The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is a project of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. It was established to provide a central, independent source of scientific evidence of what works in education to help teachers and administrators make informed decisions. The practice guide, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools from the Clearinghouse* was developed by a panel of nationally recognized experts. Its recommendations and strategies are based on research that has withstood rigorous external peer review. The guide includes four major recommendations:*

- 1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.*
- 2. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.*
- 3. Provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins).*
- 4. Build a committed staff.*





## Creating the Culture

As an instructional leader, your top priority in an RTI world is not rushing out and buying supplemental instructional kits or scurrying to develop a series of tiers and procedures. Job one for you is fostering a shared belief system in which the following are the norm:

- differentiated instruction is standards-based
- student-centered instructional decisions are shaped by evaluation and assessment data
- prevention is better and easier than remediation
- research-based interventions are targeted to specific needs
- intervention and progress monitoring results are regularly documented in writing
- collaboration occurs frequently, in a standardized manner, through an instructional support team
- time, personnel, and resources are used flexibly for maximum student benefit

### *Ah, but where to begin...*

Establishing learning communities in which participants discuss selected readings, present model lessons, explore instructional strategies, and engage in dialogue related to DI with colleagues is a highly effective way to jump-start the reshaping of the culture in your building. Implementing purposeful mentoring relationships and fostering strategic co-teaching arrangements are other excellent ways to move forward as a staff and foster a school-wide culture in which all students thrive.

## Partners in the Process

Not only teachers but also students, parents, and the community must be educated about the changes ahead. Both RTI and DI involve doing what is most appropriate for each student based on pre-assessment results, readiness, learning style preferences, and other factors that affect learning. DI is not the individualized instruction of the 1970s, but a flexible way of matching students with the most appropriate learning opportunities in a given subject or unit of instruction.

This kind of atmosphere is a major change not only for some educators; it is a very different way of “doing school” for many children and parents. They too will need a gradual introduction and time to embrace these new opportunities, routines, and instructional methods. But parents and students will soon appreciate how much more motivating and comfortable learning becomes under these flexible and responsive conditions.

## Status Check

If you are on track for successful implementation of an RTI framework, then you’ve begun to:

- educate yourself about EIS, RTI, and DI
- enhance your personal understanding of strategic planning, organizational leadership, and the establishment of a cohesive school culture
- master the tools, techniques, and procedures required to facilitate the brainstorming, planning, launching, and enhancing of an RTI framework in your school
- focus staff development and school improvement efforts around building a culture that supports school-wide use of DI—even if that means starting with just a handful of your most committed teachers
- develop an instructional support or intervention planning team and the guidelines its members will follow
- share the process with students, parents, and the wider community

You might be wondering, “I’ve started these things; now what?” If so, it is time to look ahead and anticipate issues that can arise and impede progress.



*In her book, A Principal's Guide—Implementing Response to Intervention, Susan Hall recommends that all initial communication from the principal focus on the core beliefs that underlie RTI. Once there is staff buy-in, conversations and efforts can then focus on developing and implementing a successful RTI framework.*



## Anticipate Key Issues

The rollout of an effective RTI framework is truly a multiyear process that needs to be planned and executed in careful increments. That makes time one of the most essential considerations. It takes time to:

- set goals
- reshape a school's culture and core beliefs and handle resistance
- complete essential professional development and plan for mastery through sustained training
- learn how to implement effective differentiated instruction on a daily basis
- develop expertise related to formative assessment and data-driven instruction
- collaboratively develop an RTI framework and the accompanying routines, expectations, and procedures that demonstrate fidelity to RTI principles
- select and test appropriate universal screening tools
- develop a system that prioritizes services based on which learners are at greatest risk
- help teachers adjust to and understand the need for data-based decision making that RTI brings
- develop a model that gets results
- troubleshoot the logistics and continually develop and refine the process
- build understanding about RTI roles and responsibilities among staff, students, parents, and the community

To ensure steady progress, it is wise to collaborate with key staff members to develop a time line with clear checkpoints and short- and long-term goals.

It is likely that the master schedule as you and your staff know it will have to change to accommodate the new expectations for EIS and RTI. According to Lyon, Fletcher, et al. (2001), early identification and interventions for reading difficulties could reduce the number of children in special education by 70 percent. Similar findings by other experts support first focusing time, energy, and funding at the lowest grade levels, where aggressive implementation of Early Intervening Services has been proven to have the most significant impact. Then the framework can be expanded systematically to additional grades in the following years.

Providing additional support for teachers is an expectation under RTI. Of course, teachers can't just squeeze intervention time for struggling students into their daily schedules on a hit-or-miss basis. It requires a collaborative



effort between general and special education teachers, specialists, and other school-based personnel. And developing a building-wide plan of action and a supportive master schedule that includes time for intervention is essential to maximizing benefits.

Personnel issues must also be examined. Staff members with expertise in special education will be asked to take on new responsibilities as they advise classroom teachers on additional instructional or behavioral strategies to help struggling learners. They may also be needed on occasion to observe students while interventions are underway in the classroom. Specialists may be asked to provide more intensive help to students who have failed to respond to earlier interventions. Reading coaches, paraprofessionals, and even counselors will find their roles changing too. As an instructional leader, you will need to be sensitive to the impact these new expectations will have and support staff members as their schedules and responsibilities evolve. Working collaboratively with the teachers' union to ensure understanding of federal expectations and compliance with IDEA can help prevent potential conflicts.

Allocation of financial resources will require thoughtful examination. To support early intervention, IDEA regulations allow up to 15 percent of federal special education funds to be used for this purpose in general education classrooms. Determining the best uses of these funds will be a priority as you prepare staff to provide EIS and DI, and create your school's RTI framework to support at-risk learners.

## Embrace the Essentials

Under RTI, everybody wins. Consistent use of DI ensures that all students find learning more comfortable and rewarding, whether they are at risk, on grade level, or gifted. Students become more engaged because barriers to learning are removed. Discipline problems that result from student frustration decline. Instead of laboring in isolation, teachers can brainstorm and problem-solve with colleagues to provide appropriate learning experiences and interventions. Because *all* students shift between instructional settings and activities throughout the day, those receiving any sort of additional services are no longer stigmatized. And when parents see educators working to maximize their child's achievement, they become valued collaborative partners.

As an instructional leader, you shape the culture and share the vision. Once the foundation is in place, you can move ahead to the next phase in your school's transformation—determining the most appropriate RTI protocol for at-risk learners who require more intensive help.



*The article, “Early warning system: How to prevent reading disabilities”, by Reid Lyon and Jack Fletcher states:*

*“Early intervention can greatly reduce the number of older children who are identified as LD. Without early identification, children typically require intensive, long-term special-education programs, which have meager results. Early intervention allows ineffective remedial programs to be replaced with effective prevention while providing older students who continue to need services with enhanced instruction so they can return to the educational mainstream.”*



## Print Resources

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- Lyon, G.R., and J.M. Fletcher. 2001. "Early Warning System: How to Prevent Reading Disabilities. *Education Next*, 1 (2): 22–29.
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- The What Works Clearinghouse. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.
- Wormeli, R. 2006. *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

## Online Resources

[www.rtinetwork.org](http://www.rtinetwork.org)  
[www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)

***To learn more about related professional development resources and opportunities, visit [www.SDE.com/RTI](http://www.SDE.com/RTI).***





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