

EDUCATION WEEK'S

SPOTLIGHT

On Response to Intervention

"Response to intervention," or RTI, relies on early evaluation of students' learning needs to modify the instruction they receive. This "Spotlight" takes a closer look at the increasingly popular practice.

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Embracing 'Response To Intervention'

By Christina A. Samuels
Sully, Iowa

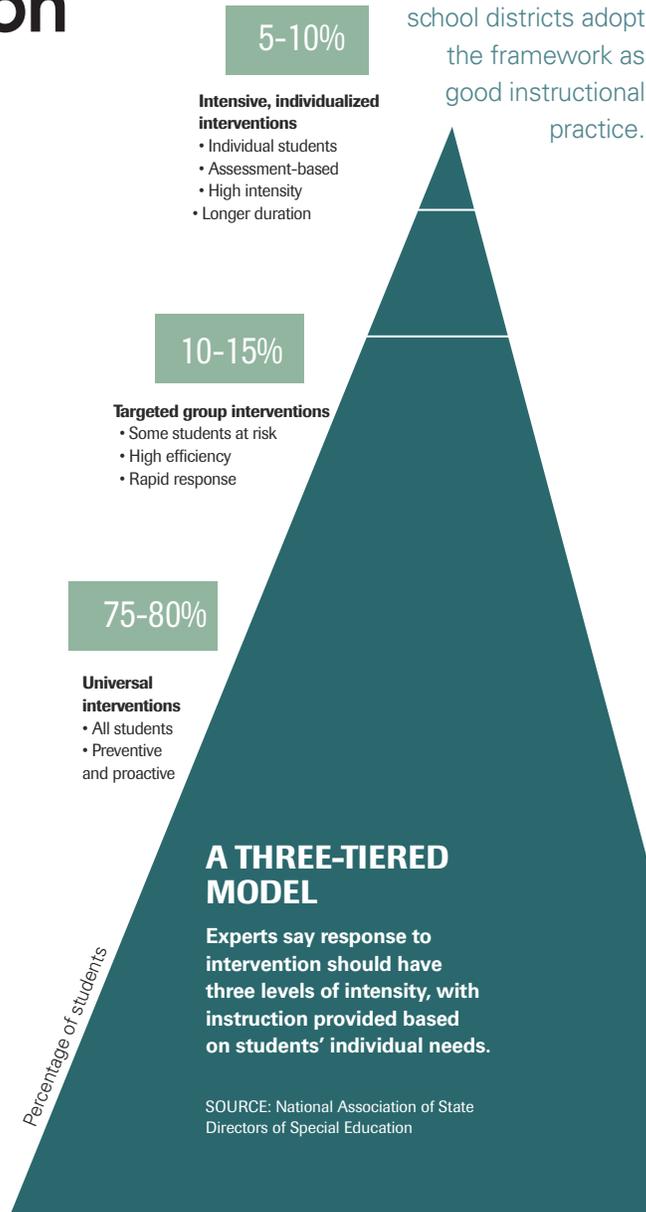
Identifying struggling students wasn't an issue for teachers at Lynnville-Sully Elementary School, tucked away in this town of 900, an hour's drive east of Des Moines. Knowing what to do next was the hard part.

Even in an elementary school with just 188 pupils, it was hard for teachers to offer intensive instruction to children who needed extra help while juggling the needs of the rest of their students. The school's reading-support staff created lesson plans that didn't always relate to regular classroom work. And teachers felt they had to wait too long to get extra resources to help the students who needed it.

"You know what they need, and yet you had to prove it," said Cindy Gibbs, a 2nd grade teacher. "Sometimes you'd miss half a year before you'd get them in the resource room" for extra help.

Acting on such concerns, the principal and teachers revamped the school's instructional program in the fall of 2006, introducing a framework best known as "response to intervention," or RTI. Called "instructional decision-making" here in Iowa, RTI relies on frequent, short tests of students and on regular adjustments of instruction, based on what those tests show of a student's progress,

The Heartland Area Education Agency in Iowa is helping school districts adopt the framework as good instructional practice.



Iowa's Principles for RTI

- **All students are part of one proactive educational system**

Belief that all students can learn

Use available resources to teach all students

- **Use scientific, research-based instruction**

Curriculum and instructional approaches must have a high probability of success for most students

Use instructional time efficiently and effectively

- **Use instructionally relevant assessments that are reliable and valid**

SCREENING: Collecting data for the purpose of identifying low- and high-performing students at risk for not having their needs met

DIAGNOSTIC: Gathering information from multiple sources to determine why students are not benefiting from instruction

FORMATIVE: Frequent, ongoing collection of information, including both formal and informal data, to guide instruction

- **Use a problem-solving method to make decisions based on a continuum of student needs**

Provide strong core curriculum, instruction, and assessment

Provide increasing levels of support based on increasing levels of student needs

- **Data are used to guide instructional decisions**

To align curriculum and instruction to assessment data

To allocate resources

To drive professional-development decisions

- **Professional development and follow-up modeling and coaching to ensure effective instruction at all levels**

Provide ongoing training and support to assimilate new knowledge and skills

Anticipate and be willing to meet the newly emerging needs based on student performance

- **Leadership is vital**

Strong administrative support to ensure commitment and resources

Strong teacher support to share in the common goal of improving instruction

Leadership team to build internal capacity and sustainability over time

SOURCE: Iowa Department of Education

or “response,” to lessons.

Iowa's school district officials are among the most enthusiastic promoters of the method, which is garnering intense interest among educators around the country.

“RTI is this big thing that really can transform how we approach teaching all kids,” said W. David Tilly III, the director of innovation and accountability for the Heartland Area Education Agency, which provides resources and professional development to 54 districts in the state, including Lynnville-Sully.

Part of the nationwide attention comes from the significant push the federal government has given RTI. States have used the response-to-intervention framework to implement the 6-year-old Reading First initiative authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allows states to use RTI as one tool to identify children with specific learning disabilities.

In practice, RTI can look quite different from school to school. But several key components are necessary for a successful program, researchers say. Students are generally screened early in the school year to determine if they may have educational difficulties, and to help their teachers figure out what extra lessons they may need.

Children with such difficulties are given increasingly intense instruction geared to bolstering the areas where they need help. The interventions must be scientifically based and given with fidelity, meaning that teachers must present the lessons as they were meant to be taught. Additional tests, or “progress monitoring,” continues for those students through the school year, to make sure the extra lessons are working.

Finally, if a student still hasn't responded to several different interventions, he or she may need further evaluation, or special education services. The hope among some proponents of RTI is that by providing intensive instruction as soon as a problem is noted, children can be steered away from special education.

Iowa is just one of the places where response to intervention has taken root. The state shares resources among its many small school districts through its area education agencies. The Heartland AEA, the largest of 10 in the state, has been cited often in research for its approach to RTI.

Though response to intervention's inclusion in the federal special education law has made RTI seem like a special education initiative to some, Heartland sees it as a way to change the nature of instruction for all students. Potential benefits for students with learning disabilities are just part of the positive effects RTI can have on an entire school,

they say.

Special education identification “is just the toenail on the elephant,” said Mr. Tilly, the Heartland official. “That's not what it was created for, and that's not what its best purpose is.”

In Heartland area schools, the process of introducing a school to the RTI process may begin with informal conversations with interested schools. The agency also holds daylong sessions with teams of teachers and administrators, where they are asked to evaluate thoughtfully their own readiness to launch the process. Building consensus is a crucial part of a successful program, administrators say.

But even Heartland's long experience with the practice hasn't made every school's implementation the same—or easy.

“I told teachers it was going to feel really overwhelming. We're going to be juggling a lot of balls, and it's going to feel like they're falling,” said Jolene Comer, the principal of both Lynnville-Sully Elementary School and a 120-student middle school housed in the same building. Heartland officials approached the principal because the school was already in the process of adopting a new reading curriculum. Ms. Comer said the instructional-decisionmaking process seemed to fit well with the other changes in the school.

Introducing RTI required restructuring the day so that grade-level teachers had common planning time, changing staff members' duties so they could work closely with students who were having problems, and introducing intensive professional development.

“The whole staff really felt like this was important. Now it's been a year and a half, [and] it feels like business as usual. I feel we've accomplished a lot,” Ms. Comer said.

The process has led to a new energy within the building, she added. Teachers are working together more than they ever have before. Labels for children aren't as important as they once were, she said, which she sees as a benefit. “These are all our kids,” Ms. Comer said.

In six days of training with Heartland staffers, the team from Lynnville-Sully was asked some probing questions. Among them: Is the core instruction given to all pupils the best that it can be? How will you know which students require interventions? What interventions will be used? How will you monitor effectiveness?

This is why RTI, despite having common elements, can look so different in practice from one school to the next. “This is not a scripted program,” Ms. Comer said. “You don't take this and just fit it into your day.”

At Lynnville-Sully Elementary, pupils are screened early in the school year, using

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, tests. If those tests indicate that a child has a problem with reading fluency or decoding skills, the teacher administers other diagnostic tests to pinpoint the problem, and to guide the interventions that will be used.

Parents are notified when screening shows that their child may not be learning as fast as his or her classmates. The school has carved out time in the day to allow reading-support teachers to work with small groups of students for at least 30 minutes a day.

Students who need more help get more time, sometimes with the school's special education teacher, who has a constantly changing group of children to work with. In addition to the students formally identified as requiring special education services, the teacher also works with children who do not have individualized education programs under the IDEA, but just need more help.

The principal, reading-support teachers, and classroom teachers meet once a month to discuss the data they are collecting on students. Three times a year, the school has "data days" to take a deeper look at the overall curriculum and student performance based on other tests.

About 30 percent of the school's pupils are now receiving some type of intervention, a percentage the principal would like to see go down.

The process is too new at Lynnville-Sully for the school to have much hard data on its progress. Instructional decisionmaking had only been in place at the school for a handful of months when the students took the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills last spring. However, the school has seen improvement in its DIBELS fluency scores. Seventy-nine percent of 1st graders met the standards by the end of the 2005-06 school year, a year before the RTI process started. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, the benchmark rate was 83 percent.

At the 2nd grade level, 48 percent of students met the DIBELS benchmarks in 2005-06. In 2006-07, the passing rate was 81 percent.

Lynnville-Sully still has work to do, the principal and teachers acknowledge. The instructional-decisionmaking structure needs a better place for children who are gifted, teachers say.

And implementation at the middle school, which started this past fall, a year after the elementary school began its work, has been slower. Part of the problem is the particular challenges offered by older students and the structure of the middle school day.

The middle school teachers, unlike the elementary school teachers, weren't necessarily

as eager to embrace change, said Shannon Harken, the Heartland AEA educational consultant who works with Lynnville-Sully on its RTI implementation.

Ms. Comer "has had to take two totally different approaches with the two faculties. The middle school teachers liked what they were doing before," Ms. Harken said.

But within the middle school, teachers are noting positive effects.

"There's a lot more people involved in the conversation [about students], and that's huge," said Melissa Doll, who works with middle school students deemed at risk of failing academically. "How much more powerful for the student when we're all sharing data, and sharing what we see."

The elementary teachers said they see that same power in sharing information.

"We're catching more 'on the edge' kids," said Lisa Foster, a 5th grade teacher, referring to students who could be having academic problems but can fade from attention in a classroom of students with more pressing needs.

"Before, we didn't know how to use all our resources. But because our [instructional-decisionmaking] stuff is so data-driven, we don't let them fall behind," she said.

Coverage of district-level improvement efforts is underwritten in part by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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RTI Method Gets Boost in Spec. Ed.

Intervention can spot learning disabilities

By Christina A. Samuels

The main federal special education law's promotion of a practice that can identify children with learning disabilities and give them early help has brought new attention to the method.

Known as "response to intervention," or RTI, the method aims to catch specific learning disabilities before the students fall far behind their classmates. In the best cases, teachers can ease the disabilities and make formal special education services unnecessary.

The educational practice is specifically mentioned in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which covers some 6.8 million children.

President Gerald R. Ford signed the original version of the IDEA into law 30 years ago this week, instituting a landmark federal mandate that states provide children with disabilities a "free, appropriate public education."

The IDEA's reference to RTI, and the Department of Education's promotion of the practice in its proposed rules for the 2004 law, have made it a focus of the special education community. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education devoted a session to the method at its annual meeting in Minneapolis last month, and the group has published a 60-page booklet on it. A Web site that is an RTI clearinghouse, created by a special education administrator for the 5,900-student Baldwinsville, N.Y., school district, receives more than 200,000 page views monthly. RTI proponents are giving lectures around the country on the practice.

"Being part of the statutory language obviously elevates this thing called RTI to a high, visible level," said Michael Armstrong, the president of NASDSE and the director of the Ohio Department of Education's office for exceptional children. "It opens it up to conversation on both sides."

Some may look at RTI and say it's the "latest fix of the day," Mr. Armstrong said. "But it's bigger than that."

The law does not require the method's use, but says states may not prohibit school

districts from using the model to evaluate students for learning disabilities. By far, the largest percent of students getting special education services have "specific learning disabilities"—about 49 percent, according to a 2003 report from the Education Department that examined demographics of students in special education.

In a response-to-intervention teaching model, all students—those potentially with learning disabilities and those without—are given a variety of "interventions," or lessons, on subjects that are causing them difficulty. The interventions often are not more complicated than or different from the methods teachers might use for any struggling student.

Monitoring Progress

However, teachers must monitor student progress with frequent short assessments, as often as twice a week. If a student makes sufficient gains, the teacher can move on to the next lesson. But if the child fails to respond to an intervention, different ones are tried before the school and parents decide that special education is necessary.

RTI differs dramatically from the most widely used method of identifying children for learning disabilities, which involves giving a student an IQ test and determining whether there is a severe discrepancy between the child's abilities as measured by the test and his or her achievement in the classroom. Critics of that method, referred to as the discrepancy model, say that it causes schools to wait too long to offer intensive help to students with problems.

The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA says that states may not require school districts to use the discrepancy model.

Districts sometimes end up caught between a true response-to-intervention approach and the discrepancy model, which is described by some as a "wait to fail" approach, said George Batsche, a professor of school psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa. A frequent lecturer on RTI, he gave a presentation to the state directors' group.

Too often, a few interventions are tried with students, but no one measures closely to see if the strategies are working, and time is lost, Mr. Batsche said.

"Everybody has the same amount of time in school," he said. "We can't extend the time at the end of their academic career, so every minute counts."

Making Distinctions

RTI also represents a shift from early federal special education policy, which was focused primarily on trying to get children who had special needs into classrooms from which they long had been excluded.

"It was a public-policy priority to find those kids and get them into school," said W. David Tilly III, the coordinator of assessment services for the Heartland Area Educational Association in Johnston, Iowa, which provides support services to 55 school districts in the state.

The downside, Mr. Tilly said, is that too many students may be identified with learning disabilities when they may have other needs.

Also, most experts agree that students in special education are at risk of being excluded from the general education curriculum. Some provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act address that issue by requiring districts to break out separately the test scores of children with disabilities to see if they are making adequate yearly progress toward state proficiency standards.

Supporters of response to intervention embrace it as a way of distinguishing children who have genuine learning disabilities from children who might be low achievers for some other reason. And, it doesn't have to differ dramatically from what teachers have done in the past, they say.

"Every school does bits and pieces of this thing. The goal is to do it in a more systematic, or more systemic way," said Diane Morrison, the director of support services for the Northern Suburban Special Education District, a cooperative association of 19 suburban Chicago districts, referring to RTI.

Improved technology makes some of the data-collection efforts required for RTI much easier now than they may have been in the past, but "it takes a lot of effort," Ms. Morrison said. "But if [the RTI method] is good and it's worth it, you've got to do it."

Ms. Morrison has been working with Illinois schools for more than 10 years to implement the RTI method, and she said it's spreading from elementary schools to middle schools and high schools. Response to intervention can also be used to address behavior problems, not just academic ones, she said.

Intervention Strategies

Jim Wright, a special education administrator, has created a Web site, www.interventioncentral.org, where teachers can get hints and help on intervention techniques. Some examples of research-based interventions he lists to help struggling readers:

ASSISTED READING PRACTICE: The student reads aloud while an accomplished reader follows along silently. If the student makes a mistake, the helping reader corrects it.

WORD-ATTACK HIERARCHY: The instructor prompts the student to apply a hierarchy of word-attack skills whenever the student misreads a word. The instructor gives these cues in descending order, from general ("try another way") to specific ("break the word into parts and pronounce each one"). If the student correctly identifies the word after any cue, the instructor stops delivering cues and tells the student to continue reading.

LISTENING-PRACTICE PREVIEW: The student follows along silently as an accomplished reader reads a passage aloud. Then the student reads the passage aloud, receiving corrective feedback as needed.

STUDENT SELF-COMPREHENSION CHECK: Students periodically check their understanding of sentences, paragraphs, and pages of text as they read silently. When they run into problems with vocabulary or comprehension, they use a checklist to apply simple strategies to solve them. For example: At the end of each sentence, they ask, "Did I understand this sentence?" If they do, they say "Click!" and keep reading. If they don't, they say "Clunk!" and refer to the strategy sheet to correct the problem. As students learn the technique, the teacher can introduce an unobtrusive nonverbal signal.

SOURCE: Jim Wright, www.interventioncentral.org

With RTI, "you're making decisions from the very beginning," she said. "You do interventions and you're monitoring [students], not to get them into special education, but for improvement."

Advocates' Concerns

Opinions about the method among advocates for children with disabilities are mixed. Ms. Morrison said that some advocates are worried that the method draws scarce resources away from children with special needs.

Justine Maloney, the Washington representative for the Pittsburgh-based Learning Disabilities Association of America, said that she's concerned RTI focuses mainly on young elementary school children who have problems reading. The spectrum of learning disabilities extends beyond young children, and beyond reading, she said.

Ms. Maloney also notes that the process is time-consuming for teachers who already may be overloaded, or not well trained in how to evaluate children.

"I can remember with the severe-discrepancy model, the [IDEA] said that before you refer the kids [to special education], you're supposed to try all these interventions. But it was easy to dump kids," Ms. Maloney said, even though according to the special education law, no one method is supposed to be the sole criterion for determining if a child has a disability.

So, RTI should not be seen as a quick fix, she said. "We do like easy answers, but it's a very mixed bag."

Ricki Sabia, the associate director of the New York City-based National Down Syndrome Society's National Policy Center, sees a clear benefit in RTI for the children she works with. Too often, children with mental retardation may have additional learning disabilities that go unaddressed, because all of the problems are lumped into the same category, she said.

But a child with a cognitive disability can still have dyslexia, she gave as an example. Under response to intervention, teachers would have to try different approaches before saying mental retardation is the only problem, she said.

"The IQ-discrepancy test is not going to help our kids" get diagnosed with learning disabilities, said Ms. Sabia. "It's good to see some other way of evaluating our kids."

In Ohio, Mr. Armstrong, the special education director, said that his state's educators are taking advantage of the interest in RTI to educate themselves. Some schools are using RTI practices, but in others the method died out after a school leader who

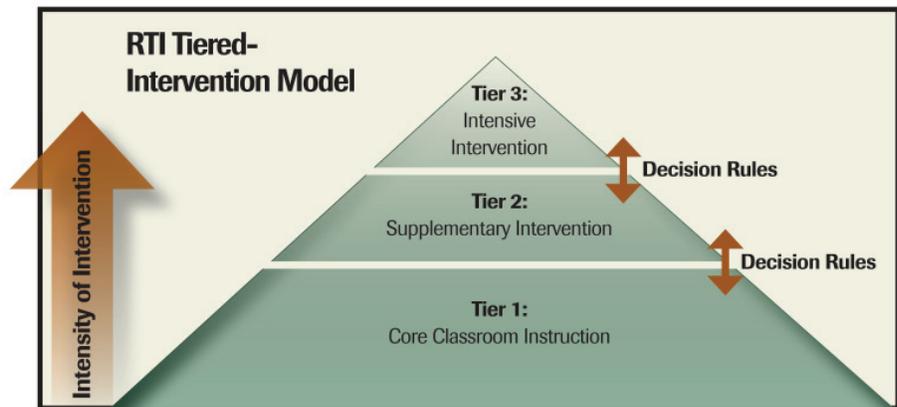
championed it left the building, he said.

However, the concept is not entirely new, he said.

"We're looking to understand RTI in its truest form, and how we can begin to build a culture," Mr. Armstrong said. "It's about restacking the information that we already have."

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What does RTI Mean for the Classroom?



SOURCE: Response to Intervention Consortium, Nebraska Department of Education

Response to Intervention, a framework for modifying instruction based on early evaluation of student-learning needs, is gaining traction in schools even as some educators struggle with the approach. In a Web chat on teachermagazine.org, two RTI experts, Judy Elliott, chief academic officer of the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Douglas Fuchs, professor and Nicholas Hobbs Chair in Special Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, answered readers' questions on the method. Here are some excerpts from the discussion.

Why is it that some regular education and special education teachers feel threatened by RTI?

JUDY ELLIOTT: We have for decades worked in silos in education. Now we are saying come and talk about what is working for all students. We have functioned for many years in what I call private classrooms and publicly shared little data. Now, in the past decade, things have shifted. I do not see folks resistant to RTI per se but rather to change. We went through this when "inclusion" came along. Resistance was often driven by fear of the unknown, a lack of knowing what and how to work with special education students, etc. Resistance is a symptom of a bigger issue.

Have you found successful ways to get teacher buy-in?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Indeed, consensus is the first step to building an integrated approach for

instruction. I refer you to NASDSE.org to see the blueprints on site and district development of RTI. Consensus of both is the key. Folks that are resistant to change, in my opinion, are responding to a fear of loss of some sort. Having open, courageous conversations about what is working, what is not, what areas of concern teachers have is the start of laying the important groundwork for RTI. Teachers are absolutely key players in this—they are the ones working with students daily and know best what the needs of students and proper interventions are.

How effective is the RTI model in a middle school? Is there any research that supports that it works at that level?

DOUGLAS FUCHS: RTI was initially modeled after Reading First, the early-intervention centerpiece of NCLB. As such, it was conceived as a service-delivery system for the primary grades (K-3). Moreover, it was initially intended for reading because the research on early reading is very strong. During the past 3-5 years, we've seen RTI morph into "something for everyone." The fact of the matter is that there is very little research on how to think about RTI, let alone implement it, in middle and high school. I'm not saying RTI at these levels is wrong-headed; rather, there is very little empirically to guide us at this time.

We are struggling with the intervention portion of RTI. The call is for research-based strategies. Is there an accepted resource for these strategies/lessons that are research-based?

DOUGLAS FUCHS: This is an important question. I've got two suggestions. First, there is a newly established National Center on RTI funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Its email is: rticenter@air.org. The

Web site has important pages and links that will lead you to what you're looking for. Second, there is the RTI Action Network. I highly recommend these sites.

How much professional development is required to implement RTI in a school system?

JUDY ELLIOTT: The degree of professional development is dependent upon what you have in place already. There is a significant amount of not only professional development but planning and infrastructure-building that needs to be done to sustain the practice of RTI. Start with a needs assessment to get the ball rolling. See NASDSE.org site blueprints and RTINetwork.org for more information.

What is the administrator's role?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Huge! Leadership is so very critical in this as well as in any innovation or change in schools. The administrator is the leader, coach, data consumer, and the person that works to align all that goes on at the school site to support RTI. The administrator makes decisions of what goes to the back burner or off the stove so that RTI work can be done. This cannot and should not be rolled out as another initiative. It is a way to integrate and better coordinate intervention and efforts currently going on and also assess things that are being implemented. What do the data indicate? The administrator is the leader that brings folks around the table to have open dialogue about what is working, what isn't, and why. Leadership is huge with this.

How can RTI be adapted for gifted learners?

JUDY ELLIOTT: RTI is a framework that works for all students, including gifted. Gifted students, too, have learning and behavioral needs. Using the pyramid or

triangle of RTI, specific interventions can be identified to support highly able students that need an extra scoop at Tier 2 or more specially challenging opportunities at Tier 3. In Portland, Oregon, there is a school for students in the top one percent in achievement. They are Tier 3 and are being challenged as well as effectively supported with their giftedness. So yes, the RTI concept works for gifted.

What role should literacy and math specialists play in each of the tiers of RTI? Should we offer to pull those kids who struggle? Or should we foster a climate of differentiation with teachers right in the classroom?

JUDY ELLIOTT: Nice question. The role of specialists should be changed according to the needs of your building and students you serve. The bottom line for RTI is predicated on effective instruction first and foremost. Support at Tier 1 is critical so that truly the students that need Tier 2 and 3 are not curriculum casualties. I would not suggest pulling students that struggle unless that fits into a tiered-intervention approach for the school. You need to look at multiple measures to decide which students are doing well or struggling (a.k.a. universal screens), based on data you build for tiers of intervention that increase in time and intensity.

Please explain the role of a school psychologist post-RTI implementation.

DOUGLAS FUCHS: School psychologists should have strong, substantive roles at the building level, helping teachers monitor school performance at the various tiers, and explaining, when necessary, what a child's time-series data are saying, whether and how instruction at Tier 2 or 3 might be changed to accelerate a student's performance. A few school-psychologist academics encourage a large reduction in the number of children identified as special needs. They argue that if the current proportion of children with special needs is about 12 percent nationally, we can get this number down to 3 percent.

With such a reduction, they hope school psychologists will be liberated from their testing roles and will have more opportunity to act as I've described above. My concern is that some of their assumptions are not tenable.

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Spec. Ed. Is Funding Early Help

By Christina A. Samuels

Bit by bit, the U.S. Department of Education is trying to pull down the walls that have traditionally separated general and special education.

One facet of the plan is the department's support of "response to intervention," or RTI, an educational technique that bolsters the skills of academically struggling students before they fall so far behind that they need special education services.

And another facet is "coordinated, comprehensive early-intervening services," a method of paying for RTI-related programs using federal special education dollars.

At a conference last month, state special education directors and federal officials focused on learning more about early-intervening services. The potential to help children early in their school careers is great, supporters say.

"We are hearing some really positive things about increased communications and collaborative service-delivery models," said Ruth E. Ryder, the director of the division of monitoring and state improvement planning in the Education Department's office of special education programs. "People are really anxious to get ideas about how they can work together collaboratively, and make things better for kids."

But the rules and restrictions surrounding early-intervening services are so complex that at least some state officials are wary. Shifting scarce special education dollars to general education initiatives could provide a new opportunity—or create a paperwork burden they're reluctant to take on.

"It's going to take some time to work out the kinks," said Carol B. Massanari, the co-director of the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, a federally funded agency that provides special education technical assistance to 10 states and the federal Bureau of Indian Education.

"People want to know how to do this right," she said. "They want to be able to use this leverage, but to use it in a way that's going to result in improvements."

15 Percent

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was reauthorized in 2004, the

law allowed states to take up to 15 percent of the money they receive from the federal government for special education and use it for what was deemed "coordinated, comprehensive early-intervening services."

Early-intervening services can be directed at students of all ages, though the particular focus is on pupils from kindergarten to grade 3. The services are not intended for students in special education, but for those who need extra support for academic or behavioral success.

Though states have the option of using special education money for such programs, they must make up the decrease in the special education budget through another source. States must also track for two years the academic progress of students who receive early-intervening services.

The Education Department promotes this option as a win-win proposition: General education can benefit by programs aimed at reducing academic and behavioral problems. Special education providers can concentrate on children who really need intensive additional supports because of a disability, not just those who may not have been given a strong education in their early school years.

In some cases, however, districts are required to use the full 15 percent for early-intervening services, introducing an additional layer of complexity.

The requirement to use 15 percent of a state's special education aid is triggered if the state has too many minority students in special education, or in a specific disability category, too many in restrictive settings, or too many who have undergone severe disciplinary measures like suspension or expulsion. States create their own formulas to determine what the Education Department calls "significant disproportionality."

Disproportionality

If a state identifies disproportionality in a particular racial or ethnic group within a district, the 15 percent must be spent "particularly, but not exclusively," on children in that group. An example, as provided by the department: If a school district was identifying too many African-American children as being in need of special education, the district would not be able to limit early-inter-

vening services solely to African-Americans.

Kristen Reedy, the director of the Northeast Regional Resource Center, a federal technical-assistance center that works with eight states, said the success of the program will be based largely on creative solutions by states.

"A lot of the issues out there surround the use of the funds. How can we use our federal funds in flexible ways so that we can maximize our resources?" she said.

The Education Department released technical guidance to the states in late July, Ms. Ryder said, as part of an ongoing process as states asked for more clarity on how to use the funding, particularly for RTI initiatives.

Creating that technical guidance offered an example to states, Ms. Ryder said. Because the program has the potential to affect students covered under different funding streams, federal officials who work with special education, the Title I program for disadvantaged students, and the Title III program for students learning English all worked together on the document.

"We do want to be modeling what we expect states and districts to be doing," Ms. Ryder said. "We are hearing, when we talk to people, that sometimes the Title I director and the special education director [in a district] aren't always communicating about how they can deliver better services."

But the rules and guidelines make a complicated federal program "almost unintelligible," said Daniel J. Losen, a senior education law and policy associate with the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Mr. Losen, who has studied issues of minority overidentification in special education and discipline, said the department is sending mixed messages. On the one hand, he said, it is asking states to look specifically for racial overidentification in some areas. But states can't target their programs directly to the affected group, he said.

More Collaboration

The prohibition on spending the early intervention dollars on students receiving special education services is also counterproductive, Mr. Losen believes.

"It's almost like all the educators turned into lawyers and are trying to not think about race," Mr. Losen said.

During the recent conference, New Jersey educators talked about their efforts. Roberta Wohle, the director of the state's office of special education programs, is working closely with the 19 districts that have been identified this school year as having a significant disproportionality.

In New Jersey, the money is being spent on

hiring extra personnel, such as behavioral specialists, she said. Ms. Wohle said districts have to use the money strategically, both to make sure it is being spent on programs that work, and that it is being spent correctly.

"Districts have to think very hard about the population that they want to serve with the money," she said. "Your use of the money has to be very well thought out."

Asked if the program promotes collaboration, Ms. Wohle said it was a good start. General and special educators in New Jersey were working closely before the program began, she said. But using special education aid for general education students was, not too long ago, impermissible.

"For years people have said, if we could have some of that special education money directed our way, we could reduce the number of students in special education," Ms. Wohle said. "Now we'll have the opportunity to see if it's true."

Published January 23, 2008

'Response to Intervention' Sparks Interest, Questions

Critics Say Approach Depends On Too Many Complex Factors

By Christina A. Samuels

As a demonstration site designated by Oregon as a prime example of "response to intervention" in action, the Tigard-Tualatin district has had to pare visiting groups down to no more than 25 people. During the last few visits, 50 people descended on the district just outside Portland at one time.

"We're trying to strike a balance between efficiency for our district and, at the same time, offering something for people who want to see what we're doing," said David Putnam, one of the RTI project managers in the 12,000-student district.

As educators in Tigard-Tualatin and elsewhere are learning, a lot of people want to see what they are doing. Response to intervention—an educational framework that promises to raise achievement through modification of lesson plans based on frequent "progress monitoring"—is one of the most-discussed education topics today.

"People are hungry" for information, said Maurice McLnerney, a co-project director for the newly created National Center on Response to Intervention. The technical-assistance center, based in Washington, is funded by a five-year, \$14.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's office of special education programs.

While supporters are urging widespread adoption of RTI, saying it can transform educational practice, others are offering cautions.

Although RTI has shown success with children just learning how to read, skeptics note that the research base is less solid for older students and students in other academic subjects. Some parent groups also are concerned about how RTI fits into the legal process created by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal law that guides educational practice for special education.

Creating an effective RTI process in thousands of schools, moreover, is a huge undertaking. And other observers are unsure whether RTI can do what federal law suggests—offer a way to diagnose accurately whether a student has a learning disability.

Supporters say such a process, properly used, could reduce the rolls of special education and save districts millions.

If RTI is a train that is already rolling down the track, "it's a track that's being constructed right in front of the train," said Douglas Fuchs, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and longtime researcher in learning disabilities.

Many Tiers

Those concerns shouldn't halt the adoption of a process that could be a powerful tool for improving student achievement if carefully implemented, say RTI proponents. Federal education law requires that before any student is placed in special education, the school must ensure that his or her learning problem is not linked to inadequate instruction.

The data-crunching element of RTI is a way to do that, said George M. Batsche, a professor of school psychology at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, and the co-director of its Institute for School Reform. "The law says before we ever think about special ed, we have to look at general ed," he said. "Support services can't fix the basic service."

In most RTI programs, students are given a basic screening early in the school year, to spot any potential educational deficits. Those who may have difficulties are given additional tests, to allow school-based teams to zero in on the problems and craft an approach to addressing them.

Students are then given intensive education in a "multi-tiered" system of service delivery. The small numbers of students who do not respond well to any interventions are considered to be at the top of the tiers, and are more carefully evaluated for possible referral to special education services.

The promise is that general education teachers will be able to accurately identify the problems that students are having, and nip those in the bud before they lead to entrenched difficulties, or referral to special education.

The process has been endorsed by the federal government through the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, which allows schools to use up to 15 percent of federal special educa-

tion dollars on early-intervention programs for students who are not identified as needing special education, but who need extra support in the classroom.

The special education law also allows RTI to be used as part of the process for determining if students have a learning disability. Widespread practice for identifying students with learning disabilities involves testing students' intelligence and comparing it with their classroom achievement. Students who have a severe discrepancy between IQ and achievement are often considered learning-disabled, but that process has been criticized as a "wait to fail" model that identifies students as learning disabled who could be helped just by getting better teaching.

Maligned Tools

The IDEA does not eliminate severe-discrepancy testing, but says that states must not require it if a school or district would like to use another process. Most states allow districts to use RTI and severe-discrepancy testing or other methods if they choose, but two states—Colorado and West Virginia—have eliminated or plan to eliminate severe-discrepancy as an identification method altogether.

Florida and Indiana have proposed doing so, according to Perry A. Zirkel, a professor of education and law at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa.

Critics of RTI often focus on the question of how students with learning disabilities are identified. RTI replaces one maligned tool, standardized IQ testing, with another, standardized instruction, they say. But not enough is known about what makes some students respond to certain interventions, they argue, and RTI relies heavily on skilled general education teachers to give students interventions with fidelity—meaning that they are taught the way researchers intended them to be.

"I'm concerned that it is a reinvention of 'wait to fail,'" Naomi P. Zigmond, a professor of special education at the University of Pittsburgh, said of RTI. "Although it was a promoted as a new way of identifying children with learning disabilities, it is still a waiting game as different things are tried."

Ms. Zigmond also suggested that RTI might not cut down on a common criticism of severe-discrepancy testing, which is that it overidentifies students.

Teachers using the model will be swimming in data about whether their students are making progress, but the progress targets are "quite arbitrary," she said. Constant exposure to data, and faulty targets, could cause some teachers to refer just as many students

assistance centers and sponsoring events that allow RTI researchers and practitioners to share their views, federal officials are proving that RTI is important to the future of general and special education, he said.

Mr. Batsche, one of the speakers at a recent RTI summit held just outside Washington, said he could not remember in his 35 years of education experience a similar event where federal education officials asked teams from all the states and territories to gather to discuss an educational issue.

"The message was straightforward: We're going to be doing this," Mr. Batsche said. "That's a very simple message, but very powerful."

Published March 19, 2007

High Schools Try Out RTI

Using the framework with older students poses challenges, but shows promise, educators say.

By Christina A. Samuels
Colorado Springs, Colo.

"Response to intervention" as a model for boosting student achievement has taken off like wildfire.

When it comes to research on how best to implement the process for students in middle and high school, though, the flame abruptly fizzles out. There's little RTI research that is specific to secondary schools, although it has been well studied at the elementary level.

But many schools are forging ahead. In Colorado, spurred by a state law that promotes RTI—an instructional model that links lessons, or "interventions," of increasing intensity with frequent monitoring of student progress—they're taking on the challenge of making RTI work for older students.

At the 1,800-student Palmer High School in Colorado Springs' District 11, teachers started three years ago by pulling together all the resources that existed in the school. The math department already had a program for students who were slipping. Literacy programs were in place for students who had reached high school with poor reading skills.

The school organized those resources into tiers of increasing intensity, while adding

other types of interventions for students. To fit everything into the school day, Palmer High started a tutoring center that is open and staffed during all periods.

Students are able to go to a regular class, then to the center for more instruction and reinforcement in a particular subject. Even students who are doing fine in their classes, such as those enrolled in the school's thriving International Baccalaureate program, have started coming to the tutoring center for extra help.

To screen for students who might need interventions, instructors use results from Measures of Academic Progress, a computerized assessment program aligned to state standards and administered to middle school students in the district. Results on tests like the Colorado State Assessment Program are also used as a diagnostic tool, as are teacher and parent recommendations.

This school year, Palmer High is trying out a new project: Teachers have each been asked to identify and track the progress of 10 low-performing students, so that they can pay close attention to the interventions those students receive, and then determine whether those steps are ultimately resulting in better grades.

"I think we're still in the beginning phases of it. We still have a ways to go, but we're doing some stuff that we think is pretty good," said Tom Kelly, the principal of the high school, whose enrollment is 70 percent white, 16 percent Hispanic, and eight percent black. Palmer High is one of five high schools in the 28,000-student District 11. In all, six school districts serve this city, located near Pikes Peak.

RTI is a model of instruction promoted in the regulations that accompanied the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It is often represented by three tiers, which include different levels of instruction by intensity.

Progress monitoring, usually with short assessments, is used to determine whether a student is responding to the interventions, or lessons.

The first, or “universal” tier, is intended to represent instruction and services available to all students. The second tier represents targeted, short-term instruction for students who need more help to master a subject. The third tier represents the most intensive level of instruction. A student who needs that level of help is considered to possibly need special education services.

This method of identifying children for special education differs from models that rely on students’ performance on an IQ test. (Colorado plans to drop IQ tests as a method of determining learning disabilities by August.)

However, identifying Colorado children for special education still will be a task primarily borne by elementary schools, said Ed Steinberg, the state’s director of special education.

“We don’t have the authority to mandate the systemic RTI efforts that you see in high schools,” he said. “That, in some ways, has taken on a life of its own.”

RTI has been promoted heavily at the state level, particularly by Commissioner of Education Dwight D. Jones, he said.

“He’s been using his bully pulpit when he talks to superintendents, saying this is what’s best for kids,” Mr. Steinberg said. He added that the changes schools are making are gratifying to see. “It’s the power of a good idea,” Mr. Steinberg said.

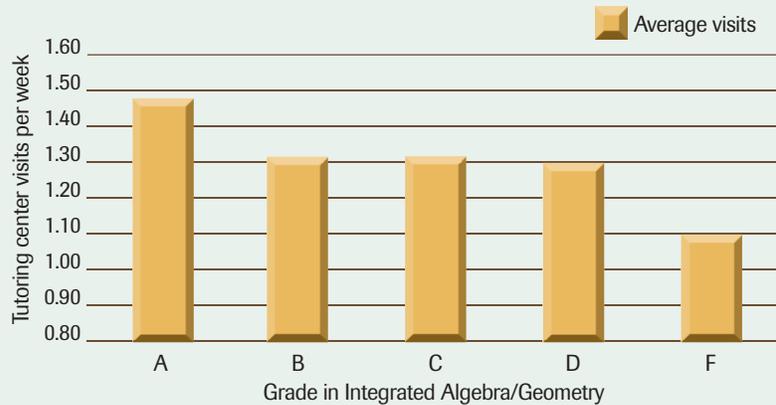
Indeed, educators at Palmer High are beginning to see some promising results, although they are very preliminary. For example, an examination of grades for students in Integrated Algebra and Geometry shows that students who received intervention through the tutoring center were earning better grades after several weeks, compared with peers in the same course who didn’t use the center.

No one at the school downplays the continuing struggles with fitting RTI into the sometimes-inflexible world of high school. In fact, Palmer High educators are able to offer a comprehensive list of challenges. Mr. Kelly said there’s still a need to find appropriate interventions for students who continue to struggle even after receiving tutoring.

For high school students, social and behavioral concerns play a large role in the success of any given intervention. Monitoring the progress of students is another hurdle, said Margaret Chumbley, a literacy-resource teacher at Palmer. With the number and frequency of some tests given to students, “I do wonder if they’re getting better at the test, or if they’re actually getting better at read-

Tutoring and Grades

Students at Palmer High School who were identified as at risk of failing algebra were offered help in its tutoring center. More frequent visits to the center were associated with better grades.



SOURCE: Palmer High School

ing,” she said.

Integrating science and social studies into an RTI framework has been harder than working with language arts and mathematics. And making time for teachers to get together to talk about individual students is difficult.

Despite the list of concerns, response to intervention offers clear positives, said Jeremy Koselak, one of the leaders of the RTI effort at the high school. The lines between regular education and special education have been blurred, so that any student who needs extra help can get it, without needing to carry a specific label.

Palmer’s focus on 9th graders helps ease the transition to high school for students who need just a little extra boost. The process is also helping the school take the first steps to examine its overall academic program. When large numbers of students need intervention in a particular subject, the school is starting to look at whether the problem lies with the students, or poor instruction.

“We have to make sure that these kids have instructional problems, and they aren’t just suffering from instructional lapses,” Mr. Koselak said.

Are Palmer High School’s efforts what response to intervention in high schools looks like?

Without scientific literature outlining an overall method for applying RTI to secondary schools, educators only have “best guesses” for what components a program should have to be successful, said Daryl F. Mellard, the director of the University of Kansas Center for Research in Learning, in Lawrence, Kan.

Others suggest that the best model of RTI

is going to vary among schools, simply because high school is so complex. What’s most important is focusing on the effectiveness of the intervention measures, they say.

Judy L. Elliott, the chief academic officer for the 708,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District and a longtime proponent of RTI, acknowledges the structural challenges. But philosophically, “it’s no different in high school than it is in the early grades,” she said. “It’s very hard, but it’s not rocket science. The bottom line is, what works?”

In fact, researchers are beginning to pay attention to what high schools are doing.

“Everyone is starting to ask questions,” said Joseph Harris, the director of the National High School Center, a federally funded technical-assistance center in Washington. “There’s just a lot of interest in what [secondary-level RTI] looks like, how should it be defined, how do you implement it.”

The center, along with other organizations, is looking more closely at middle and high schools that are using RTI, in the hope of promoting some exemplary models.

“The question for us is, when is something RTI or when is something not RTI? It’s something we’re trying to tease out,” said Helen M. Duffy, a research analyst for the Washington-based American Institutes for Research and the author of a paper titled “Meeting the Needs of Significantly Struggling Learners in High School: A Look at Tiered Intervention.”

Among the questions researchers would like to see answered are: What tools are best for screening students? How should the success of a given intervention be evaluated? How can RTI be adjusted to work under the constraints of a semester system? What

about the need for students to earn a certain number of credits to graduate?

Tiered instruction has teachers thinking about the full range of programs that exist in the school, said Charmyn Neumeyer, a literacy coach at Doherty High School, a 2,000-student high school in Colorado Springs' District 11.

Many secondary schools seem to have launched RTI programs by telling teachers that they're not much different than some of the programs already in place, which is a smart move, said Mr. Harris of the National High School Center. Introducing RTI as an entirely new concept that means more work would not go over well with most teachers, he said.

Jill Martin, the principal of another school that serves Colorado Springs, says leadership is a key ingredient—not just from the principal, but from teachers, who must support the concept.

"It doesn't feel brand-new to me," Ms. Martin, who leads Pine Creek High School in Academy District 20, a district of 20,000 students in the northern part of Colorado Springs, says of RTI. "It feels like how I've always thought about teaching kids. It's the same good instincts that you use as a

teacher, you use with RTI."

Pine Creek High has already embraced teacher collaboration through "professional learning communities," a concept promoted by former principal Richard DuFour.

"So those questions, what do we want kids to learn, and how do we know that they've learned it, were questions we were asking teachers to do every day," said Ms. Martin, who was the 2007 National Principal of the Year.

"To me, at the high school level, this can't work if there's only a small group of people who are invested in it," Ms. Martin said. People have to see, she said, that "it's not an imposition, it's a solution."

Response to intervention has fit into her school in a way similar to its implementation at Palmer High School. The school is using many of the interventions for students that it always had and has created an "opportunity center" as a place for students to get specific interventions as needed.

Kim Elliott, a Pine Creek High math teacher who works with students in the opportunity center, noted one quirk of teenagers that teachers of younger students may not have to deal with: When students were getting extra help in the library, they "were

turning off the computers when people walked through. They said, 'We don't want kids to see we're in the dummy math class.'" The school worked out a way to give the students more privacy, she said.

Having several interventions to choose from can make it hard to know exactly what's working, said Toria McGill, an assistant principal at Pine Creek.

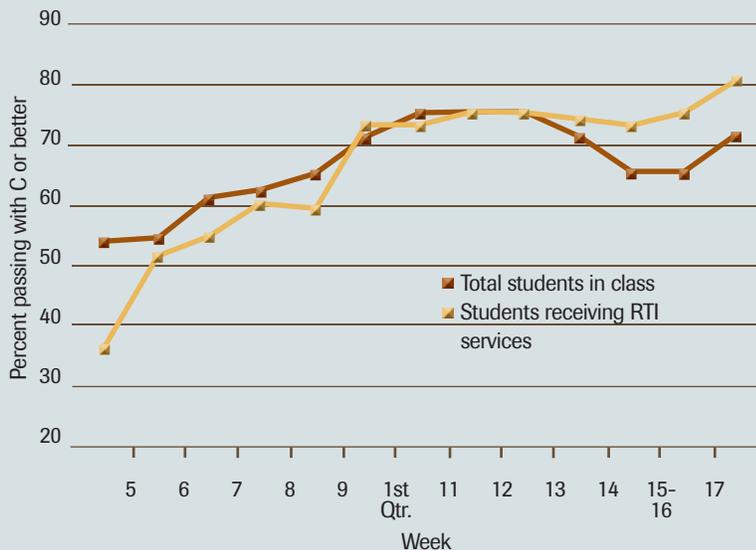
"We can't withhold something we think might be helpful in order to get good data. We're not in the research business," Ms. McGill said.

Colorado principals say they don't have all the answers. But instructors do say what they're doing now seems better than letting a youngster with academic problems slip through the cracks. ■

Coverage of pathways to college and careers is underwritten in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Comparison Group

Students receiving assistance under the school's RTI effort earned better grades in Integrated Algebra/Geometry for the first semester of this school year than other students in the same class who did not take part in the program.



SOURCE: Palmer High School

Published February 6, 2008

Council Promotes 'Response' Idea

The same tenets that underlie "response to intervention" for elementary school students can be adapted for children ages 3 to 5, researchers told congressional staff aides at a meeting on Capitol Hill last week.

Response to intervention is an educational framework in which students get increasingly intense interventions based on their performance on screening tests.

"Recognition and response" is a systematic program for educating preschoolers developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Recognition and response refers to a teacher's ability to recognize early learning difficulties in a preschool child, and respond to them with scientifically based instruction.

Both systems referred to "tiered" levels of instruction, in which most children are served in the general curriculum, but students with special needs are pulled into small groups for more directed work aimed at meeting their specific needs.

The challenge is in finding appropriate screening tests for such young children, as well as the right instruction to use with them. However, there have been promising results with children in Georgia and Arizona, through a recognition-and-response program there, researchers said at last week's meeting.

Teachers are used to gathering information on their young students, but they don't always know what to do with what they have, said Virginia Buysse, a senior scientist at the institute and a co-author of a 2006 paper on recognition and response.

"We think we'll help teachers become better," she said.

The New York City-based National Council for Learning Disabilities organized the Jan. 30 briefing, in part to underscore its other priorities for the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. The group would like to see universal developmental screening for young children, so that early-literacy or cognitive difficulties can be addressed early.

—Christina A. Samuels

Published November 8, 2006

Ed. Dept. Backs Research Plans for RTI Method

By Christina A. Samuels

With funding from the Department of Education, researchers are closely examining "response to intervention," an instructional framework that many educators say offers promise for treating children with learning difficulties before they fall behind their peers.

The Education Department's office of special education programs, or OSEP, is financing a \$1.5 million research partnership between the University of Kansas in Lawrence and the Illinois education department, which is investigating how response to intervention can improve academics and behavior in urban schools. Another OSEP project, based at the University of Texas at Austin, is refining response-to-intervention techniques used with beginning readers.

And the 2-year-old National Center for Special Education Research, a part of the federal department's Institute of Education Sciences, is seeking grant proposals by mid-November for researchers who would like to delve into all parts of response to intervention, or RTI, from how it is used with individual students to how it can be expanded to entire districts.

"This represents the possibility of fundamentally changing our idea of disability," said Douglas Fuchs, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and a co-director of the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities.

Response to intervention has many potential uses. One garnering attention at this time is its possibilities in providing early treatment for struggling students before those students fall far behind their peers academically. (See *Education Week*, Nov. 30, 2005.)

That use is mentioned briefly in the text of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, but it gets a far more expansive treatment in the final regulations for the IDEA, the nation's

special education law. However, in the final regulations, the Education Department clarifies that states can still use other methods of diagnosing children with learning disabilities.

Three Tiers

Generally, a response-to-intervention program is considered to have three tiers of instruction for struggling students. The first tier is standard classroom instruction. A student who has academic problems is then referred to a second tier, which might include small-group sessions and more intense instruction, using scientifically based methods shown to provide results for struggling learners. The third tier is yet more intensive, and may include individualized instruction.

If a student continues to have learning difficulties after the third tier, he or she may be in need of special education services.

Each tier is also marked by careful monitoring of the child's progress, which includes short tests given as often as once a week to gauge a student's responsiveness to the interventions.

Response to intervention can work within a school's current methods of instruction, and provides much more data for teachers and administrators to make decisions about teaching methods, said Larry Wexler, the associate director for the research-to-practice division of OSEP.

"It's really quite elegant in its simplicity," Mr. Wexler said.

Response to intervention has also shown success in addressing children with behavioral issues, who are given different interventions, increasing in intensity, to address whatever problems they may have.

Wayne Sailor, a professor of special education at the University of Kansas and the associate director of the university's Beach Center on Disability, is one of the research-

ers working on a project that will examine behavioral interventions in Kansas and Illinois schools. The four-year research program will train teachers and school administrators in behavior-support techniques using response to intervention.

The goal is to take the technique and extend it in areas beyond learning disabilities, Mr. Sailor said.

"I think this has general utility," he said.

Research Questions

Louis Danielson, the director of OSEP's research-to-practice division, also said in an interview that much of the research is focused on the "next generation" of response-to-intervention programs. Several schools have been using the process for some time, but research is focusing on refining the approach.

"In many places, they are at a point to build on what early implementers have learned," Mr. Danielson said.

Response to intervention has grown in stature as educators have grown dissatisfied with the other methods of diagnosing disabilities, such as the so-called IQ discrepancy method, said Mr. Fuchs. In that method, children who are struggling learners are given intelligence tests to see if there is a wide discrepancy between their intelligence and their academic progress. The IQ discrepancy model has been criticized as a "wait and fail" approach, he said.

The challenge that remains for research-

ers, Mr. Fuchs said, is defining what the different tiers of intervention should look like. Also in question is how to define how much "response" an individual student needs to show before he or she can be moved from intensive instruction in the second tier back to the classroom. At the same time, there are still questions about the definition of "nonresponsiveness"—for example, how long a student should spend at the second tier before moving to the third.

And what happens to students who still struggle after the third tier is also a matter for research, he said.

"There are a lot of groups with a lot of different views on this," Mr. Fuchs said. "Bottom line, I think the Department of Education is being very responsive to the current situation, and is definitely encouraging researchers to work on these very important questions."

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Weighing 'Response to Intervention'

The Department of Education is financing a number of current and forthcoming research studies on this technique for schools to diagnose whether children have learning disabilities, including:

Reading and RTI Vanderbilt University is investigating several questions related to reading instruction and learning disabilities, including determining valid ways of monitoring a student's "responsiveness" and determining a valid definition of nonresponsiveness to intervention.

RTI in Urban Schools The University of Kansas and the Illinois state education agency are partnering in an effort to study the approach in high-poverty urban schools in both states. The goal is to help schools devise different strong interventions both for academics and behavior.

Implementation of RTI The Education Department's National Center for Special Education Research is requesting proposals by mid-November for researchers to examine all facets of response to intervention, including how the process would work for different academic subjects, how RTI can be implemented successfully at the school and district levels, and how accurately the approach can be used to predict a student's learning disability.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education