

Special Report

Response to Intervention For High Schools

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Caution:

The information contained within this report will simplify the RTI process.

Do not read this information unless you wish to successfully implement RTI at your school.

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Response to Intervention for High Schools

Many people believe that Response to Intervention is an elementary program and not appropriate for implementation at the middle school or high school level. This is simply not the case. Many schools around the county are having great success implementing RTI at the secondary level, BUT KNOW THIS:

RTI looks different that the secondary level than it does at the elementary school level.

Many districts follow a very predictable pattern of failure. They begin by implementing RTI at the elementary level in reading. They see some success so they expand to math and possible behavioral issues. After this success, they decide to expand RTI to the secondary level. Sometimes this decision is not really a choice; your state tells you that you must implement RTI in all grades K-12.

The mistake districts make is to follow the same model of RTI at the secondary level that worked for them at the elementary level. This is a recipe for a failed implementation of RTI. Response to Intervention must look different in your middle school and high school than it does at your elementary schools. If you do not begin with this in mind, you will have a disaster on your hands.

How many times have middle school and high school teachers attended professional development presentations that were geared toward elementary school teachers? Every veteran secondary school teacher has horror stories of sitting through full presentations designed by and designed for elementary school teachers. You soon begin to recognize this problem and learn to quickly shut off the speaker than think about other things.

The same is true with RTI. If you approach your teachers with a program that looks like it is designed for elementary school students, elementary school teachers, and an elementary school schedule – your teachers will shut you off like a faucet.

Instead, we are looking for RTI to be implemented in a way that fits the secondary schedule, a secondary teacher's student load and the limits of a secondary school system.

Let's go through the steps of RTI paying special emphasis to how each step looks at the secondary level.

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Step One: Universal Screening

The universal screening is the first place that RTI starts to look different on the secondary level than it does on the elementary level. At the elementary level we may administer a reading test to all students three or four times during a school year to identify students who are having a particular difficulty. At the middle school or high school level the students come to us with a wealth of data on who is having difficulty. Most secondary schools who are successfully implementing RTI do not administer a separate universal screening. Instead they utilize data that already exists to identify which students to monitor more closely during the next phase.

Step Two: Tier One Full Class Instruction

At the secondary level, Tier One looks like a teacher teaching a full class of students. I would assume most of your teachers are doing that already – so I think you have this one covered!

But do not move on too quickly...a couple of things we should check:

First, is the curriculum that the teacher is using a research-validated curriculum? Remember, the bar has been raised here from “research-based” to “research proven”. Double-check to make sure that the curriculum being used meets this criteria. This is a one-time check that can be done at the school or district level.

Second, is the teacher making accommodations for student differences? You can call this “differentiated instruction” if you want, but I prefer to refer to it as simply “good teaching”. Students in middle school and high school have a broad range of differences including background information, rate or learning and learning style. The classroom teacher should be accommodating of as many of these as possible.

Remember this: Response to Intervention will not be successful in any school if the Tier One Full Class Instruction is not being successful with at least 75% of the students. That’s right, if more than 1 in 4 students is being unsuccessful in class, you should not implement RTI at your middle school or high school. Instead you should focus on improving classroom instruction to get to that level.

There is not a school that I know that has the resources, room, or people necessary to implement RTI if more than one in four students is failing during full class instruction. You simply cannot deliver small group or one-on-one interventions to that many students.

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If the regular classroom teacher is having success using a research-validated curriculum and accommodating individual needs in the classroom, you have Tier One covered.

Step Three: Fidelity Check during Tier One Full Class Instruction

Most teachers that I know are observed during the school year by an administrator. This is a check to see if the curriculum is being taught correctly and if documented can be used as the Tier One Fidelity Check.

If you are not being observed by an administrator, ask a colleague or specialist from your school to observe your teaching and document the observation. Secondary schools are actually set up better for peer observation in many cases than elementary schools because colleagues who teach the same subject may have different free periods available for observation.

Step Four: Progress Monitoring during Tier One

Certain students were identified using a universal screening or existing data. These students should have their progress monitored during the full class instruction. This will look differently based on what initial deficiency was identified. Here are some examples:

A ninth grade math teacher recognizes that two students lack the prerequisite skills in the area of fractions. Twice each week she gives those two students a short fraction assessment to see if those skills are improving. This is done in class by the classroom teacher while other students are working on their assignments. This data is recorded and graphed over time.

A seventh grade Language Arts teacher sees before the school year even begins that he has four students who are reading well below grade level. He administers a short reading comprehension check once each week to these four students. Usually he finds a time during class to do this, sometimes he needs to pull them out of lunch for the last 10 minutes to do this. This data is recorded and graphed over time.

A high school U.S. History teacher has three students who lack organizational skills and self-control in class. The teacher records every day whether these three students are on time, with proper supplies, have completed assignments, remain in their seats, and take notes. This data is recorded and graphed over time.

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All of these examples have something in common: regular monitoring to see if the chosen intervention is effective. Too many times we select a remedial intervention for a student and leave them in it for a semester or a year regardless of its effectiveness. That is not RTI. RTI continually asks the question: Is this intervention working?

There are specific steps that teachers are taking at the secondary school level to help students and implement RTI. Let's look separately at what schools are doing in Reading, Math, and General Study and Organizational Skills.

Reading

As No Child Left Behind starts to ratchet up the pressure, high schools around the country are doing everything they can to help readers achieve grade level proficiency.

Because the student's traditional courses are already packed with content, teachers are hesitant (or unable because of the wide span of abilities) to provide targeted reading instruction because it would come at the expense of other content that must be covered.

For this reason, schools are taking students who are reading well below grade level (or not reading at all) and providing them additional reading instruction during another part of their day. Depending on your schedule, this additional instruction may happen before school, during study hall, during lunch, after school or in the evening.

This instruction is most effective if it is individualized and self-paced. Schools use reading specialists, teachers, paraprofessionals and computer-aided instruction to provide this extra support.

Often times students must give up taking an elective class (or delay taking a specific class) to make room for this extra instruction. Schools should not feel bad forcing a student to do this because they know the additional reading instruction will help the student in every aspect of their academics.

Math

Traditionally math classes are a bit more ability-grouped at the high school level, with students taking algebra, geometry, or pre-algebra.

At the high school level when students are not yet ready for algebra, schools are increasingly finding it ineffective to continue teaching a traditional pre-algebra class.

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There are many reasons why this is ineffective, including the fact that this mode of instruction has been shown to be less effective for this particular group of students.

Instead, what many schools are doing is an individualized self-paced curriculum that focuses specifically on the deficiencies that a student has that is causing them to be unable to succeed in Algebra.

If you have 25 ninth grade students who lack the prerequisite skills to take algebra, my guess is that each of them has a different set of skills that they lack. Some may be missing fractions. Some may be missing negatives. Some may be missing exponents. Some may be missing all of the above.

Because they are all missing different skills, why would we put them all through the same remediation?

The student who lacks only fraction skills should focus on fractions. The student who lacks only positive/negative skills should focus on negatives. You get the idea.

So instead of walking classrooms full of students being taken lock-step through a pre-algebra course, schools have taken the same group of students and individualized the instruction.

Using a pre-test to measure what skills they lack, an individual course of study is designed to help them be ready for algebra. Most schools find using this method you can prepare a student to be ready for algebra in one semester rather than one year. (Of course, your schedule may not allow students to begin Algebra in January, but that is another matter.)

Some schools deliver the individualized instruction using computer aided instruction with great programs such as Skillstutor. Visit www.skillstutor.com for more information.

Other schools have "modularized" their pre-algebra curriculum into packets or "modules" so that students can focus on just the areas they need the most help, with the teacher delivering one-on-one or small-group help when needed.

In the end you will see these results:

- ✓ Students will be prepared for algebra faster because they won't be sitting through instruction on topics they already understand.
- ✓ Behavior problems go down, because students are not bored in a self-paced curriculum.

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- ✓ Effort and attendance go up because the amount of time the student spends in the class is directly related to how hard they work and the competency level they show
- ✓ Success in Algebra goes up because students need to show competency in all areas before taking the class. (In the old method, getting great grades in some chapters of pre-algebra could mask incompetence in other areas.)
- ✓ Graduation rates and college enrollment rates go up when you have a program that helps students pass Algebra.

Not a bad target to shoot for if you ask me!

General Study and Organizational Skills

In a more general sense, there are also many schools implementing Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions focusing on cross-curricular skills such as organization and motivation.

Schools all over the country are flocking to Vicki Phillip's "Personal Development" curriculum for its wealth of student activities research proven to increase student self-esteem, organizational skills, goal-setting and learning. Check it out at www.personaldevelopment.org

Even with tightly packed schedules, teachers are finding the time to implement specific classroom wide and small-group interventions, because they know that time spent on these foundational skills will pay off for years to come.

Don't let anyone fool you into thinking that helping students with essential organizational, note-taking, memorization and time management skills is outside your curriculum. It is not. It is this very set of skills that your curriculum was originally developed to enhance and develop.

High School Interventions

What do RTI interventions actually look like at the high school level?

Remember this simple rule:

Interventions always include additional instruction.

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And so, regardless of how the student is struggling, we are going to add additional instruction to the student (targeted at the specific root cause that's causing them to be unsuccessful).

For instance, if the student is struggling in Social Studies class because they aren't reading, then we want a reading intervention (additional reading instruction). It can certainly be reading instruction within the content area of Social Studies, but it will always be reading instruction/additional instructional minutes.

If the student is struggling in Science class because they lack a math background that is sufficient to succeed in the class that they're in, then we want to target that with additional math instruction.

And if the student lacks organizational skills or the ability to control their behavior in class, we want to target additional instruction and behavioral interventions after that.

So when does all this instruction take place?

The truth is: if you're not willing to adjust your schedule – the schedule of your school – to create time for these interventions, RTI implementation will not be successful at your school.

Let me give you some examples of specific times that people implement instructional interventions for students who are struggling in class.

The first is the simplest: the classroom teacher finds time in class to deliver additional instruction.

When would this happen? Well, in certain classes, there are times when the class works; when they do independent practice. During this time, some teachers have it all together and can actually deliver additional instruction to certain students during this work time. That's the simplest, it's the easiest, and it should be the first step in any RTI plan – that additional instruction is delivered during class by the classroom teacher.

Next step: Many students have a study hall, and this study hall is often free time with no instruction delivered. The next step would be to change that from a non-instructional time to instructional time – that the student could get help in a specific area (targeted to their specific deficiency) during this time.

Schools often implement this in two stages.

The first stage is to switch the student from just a supervised study hall to a monitored study hall. They recognize that certain students lack the organizational skills and, the

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skills of getting started on assignments, completing assignments, and organizing which assignments should get done first.

A monitored study hall is a simple way to put students in a slightly smaller group (instead of groups of 30, 40, or 50, maybe groups of 20) with an adult who is going to do more than sit there and correct papers while they study. This person is actually going to monitor what they are working on and ask each student as they come in, "What are you going to be working on today? What assignments do you have due later today or due tomorrow that you would like to work on?"

This changes the idea of study hall from a supervised time to a monitored time.

The second stage would be to change this time into an instructional time; to actually pair up students who are struggling in math with a math teacher in their study hall, to pair up students who are struggling in reading with a language arts teacher in their study hall, and to pair up students who are struggling to control their behavior (or with organizational or personal skills) with an instructor who's qualified to deliver organizational skills or behavior modification programs to the students during this time.

Now we have three different types of "study hall".

The first is for students who aren't struggling: they're in a study hall that is supervised (certainly by an adult), but there's no instruction delivered.

The second is a monitored study hall, where the work is monitored ("What are you working on today? Are you getting started? Are you working it to completion?").

The third is targeted by subject area and the specific deficiency to put in an instructor who is ready to teach that subject – to help students with math, help students with reading, or help students with their behavior – during that study hall time.

This is a movement of adult personnel within the student schedule (which really doesn't change that much in this model), and we are utilizing our adult personnel differently during this model.

The next question usually is, "What do you do if you don't have study hall built into your schedule or if your students don't have a study hall?" There are additional times during the school day that you can make available for additional instruction for students. These times might include: half of their lunch period (and, of course, if you're in a district or a state that doesn't allow you to remove lunch from students, you can make instruction available to students during lunch without forcing them into it), times before school and after school (many schools use 30 minutes before school or 30 minutes after school as an additional intervention instructional time), in the evening (and many schools allow parents to come in as well to have access to the school library, to the school computers

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and to additional English language instruction, if you have parents who don't speak English.), and on Saturdays. These are all opportunities that different schools are utilizing to deliver additional instruction.

Remember this when implementing RTI: At some point, you will need to deliver additional instruction to struggling students. Don't fight this, embrace it...and be creative to find a way to deliver!

Conclusion:

Is implementing RTI at the high school level a good idea? The answer is "no" if you are just going to copy an elementary school model. The answer is a definitive "yes" if you are going to work within your high school system to create an environment where struggling students get the help that they need.