

Information Digest

Responsiveness to Intervention: An SLD Determination Resource

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SLD IDENTIFICATION

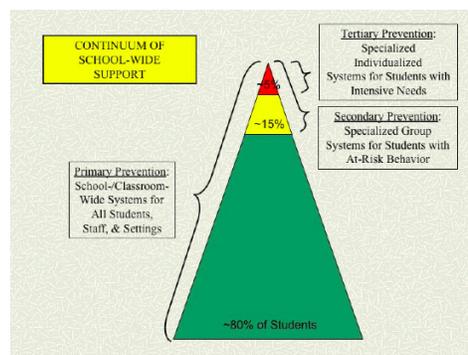
The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (P.L. 108-446) (IDEA 2004) has brought the issue of specific learning disabilities (SLD) identification procedures and criteria to the forefront. Calls for reform are not new and are based on decades of various policy, implementation, and research agendas. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has actively addressed both the scientific aspects and broader political nature of SLD identification through its efforts to advance understanding of SLD issues. Long-standing concerns among teachers and researchers involved with SLD determination center on aptitude-achievement discrepancy: teacher referral that employs local norms and student assessment that employs national norms (MacMillan & Siperstein, 2002). Some of the most pressing concerns facing SLD determination are focused on early intervention, the provision of appropriate learning experiences, and the non-categorical nature of identification implicit in some responsiveness to intervention (RTI) models.

WHAT IS RTI?

One component that can be used in the SLD determination process is RTI, which addresses the concerns of early intervention through a tiered model while simultaneously providing appropriate learning experiences through school-wide progress monitoring. Administrators can determine whether an entire class is progressing versus an individual student by focusing on the use of standard protocols for general education instruction and interventions.

RTI is a valuable construct because of its potential utility in the provision of appropriate learning experiences for *all* students and for its use in the early identification of students at risk for academic failure. Students benefit when their current levels of skill and ability are aligned with the instructional and curricular choices provided within their classroom. When a mismatch occurs, student learning and outcomes are lowered. For some students, typical classroom instruction is appropriate and meets their needs, but for others, success is not easy. The RTI hypothesis is that the earlier these floundering students are identified and provided appropriate instruction, the higher the likelihood they can be successful and maintain their class placement. Thus, their underachievement is reduced or eliminated.

The intent of RTI is to combine important features of assessment and instruction and to address many of the limitations currently associated with aptitude-achievement



Adapted from "What is School-Wide PBS?"

discrepancy models of SLD identification. The following are the core features of strong RTI. These are defined in greater detail on the NRCLD web site (Mellard, 2003):

Core Features of Strong RTI

- High-quality research-based classroom instruction
- Student assessment with classroom focus
- Universal screening of academics and behavior
- Continuous progress monitoring of students
- Implementation of appropriate research-based interventions
- Progress monitoring during interventions (effectiveness)
- Teaching behavior fidelity measures

CONCEPTUALIZING RTI

RTI is proposed as a valuable construct for schools because of its potential utility in providing appropriate learning experiences for all students as well as the early identification of students as being at risk for academic failure. RTI can be conceptualized as providing a framework for systemic reform directed at improving all learners' outcomes as intended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Three commonly described uses of RTI components are:

- prediction of at-risk students
- intervention for students with academic or behavioral difficulties
- determination of SLD (when used with a variety of assessment tools and strategies)

In the first use, students in their early school experiences (e.g., pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and early first grade) are screened for potential indicators of academic or behavioral difficulties. The second use is as a secondary level of intervention for those general education students who are not progressing at an achievement rate or level commensurate with their peers. In the third use, RTI is a component of SLD determination and can follow a variety of models: predictor-criterion models that best predict reading competency; dual-discrepancy

models that address failure at general education interventions; and functional assessment models that manipulate environmental events (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002).

ONE MODEL OF RTI

RTI is a multitiered service delivery model usually viewed as a three-tiered model similar to those used for other service delivery practices, such as positive behavioral support (e.g., Horner, Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2001). However, much discussion surrounds the issue of how many tiers constitute an adequate implementation. The literature discusses three, four, and even more tiers.

Like other service delivery models, RTI is meant to be applied on a school-wide basis, in which the vast majority of students receive instruction in Tier 1 (the general education classroom), students who are at risk for reading and other learning disabilities are identified (through school-wide screening) for more intense support in Tier 2 and Beyond, and students who have limited response to interventions provided in Tier 2 and Beyond may then be considered for specialized instruction in special education (sometimes referred to as Tier 3). The chart below provides a four-step protocol for a three-tiered RTI model (adapted from Fuchs et al., 2005).

Four-Step RTI Intervention Protocol

STEP	TIER	RESPONSIBILITY
1. Screening	1	Shared by General Education and Special Education
2. Implementing General Education and Monitoring Responsiveness to General Education	1	General Education
3. Implementing a Supplementary, Diagnostic Instructional Trial and Monitoring Responsiveness	2 and Beyond	Shared by General Education and Special Education
4. Designation of Disability, Classification of Disability, and Special Intensive Instruction Placement and Monitoring Responsiveness to Special Intensive Instruction Placement	Special Education	Special Education

CONCERNS AND REMAINING QUESTIONS

Although RTI presents a promising way of addressing many issues associated with SLD determination, unanswered implementation questions remain: there are teachers and researchers who worry that the “wait-to-fail” model will be repeated because students are at risk for going through multiple rounds of intervention before being identified; there is concern that RTI may reduce a multifaceted construct to a single facet of reading disability; current research literature provides little evidence about how RTI applies in curricular areas other than reading and beyond primary or elementary school-age children; and there are additional technical and research issues still being addressed.

Although RTI does address some significant shortcomings in current approaches to SLD identification and other concerns about early identification of students at risk for reading and math problems, RTI should be considered as merely *one* important element within the larger context of the SLD determination process. When RTI is implemented with fidelity, it is possible to identify students and intervene early in their educational process. This allows schools to have more confidence that they are providing appropriate learning to *all* students while identifying and targeting early those students who may be at risk.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD), funded by OSEP, is a joint project of researchers at Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas. NRCLD has been charged with spearheading continuing work on scientific, research-based interventions as a promising component of identification procedures for SLD while educators seek improved practices beyond achievement testing, history, and child observation. NRCLD’s primary mission is to research the critical issues surrounding SLD identification, explore alternative processes for accurate and efficient identification of children with SLD, track state- and local-level SLD identification practices, and provide technical assistance and dissemination of research results and best practices to states. In this digest, NRCLD has provided information about *one* of the resources available for SLD determination: RTI.

For an expanded discussion of this topic, you are directed to a second publication by NRCLD, *Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI): How to Do It* (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006), available on the NRCLD web site, www.NRCLD.org.

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