

2008

Response to Intervention

James O. Grant

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues>

Recommended Citation

Grant, James O. (2008) "Response to Intervention," *Colleagues*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol3/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colleagues by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.



Response to Intervention

By James O. Grant

The latest acronym to bless the field of special education is RTI. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a relatively new approach to identifying students who are “at risk” for achieving benchmark goals in various areas of achievement. Some of these students who are identified as “at risk” may be eligible to receive special education services. This new model is currently being piloted as a replacement for the discrepancy clause and the processing clause that has been used for the past 35 years to identify students with learning disabilities. According to the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education manual, *Response to Intervention Enhancing the Learning of All Children* (2007), there are eight core principles that define the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. These eight core principles are:

1. We can effectively teach all children
2. Intervene early by identifying at-risk students through universal screening
3. A multi-tier model of service delivery provides a systematic approach to support student learning
4. Use a problem-solving model to make decisions within a multi-tier model
5. Use scientific, research-based validated interventions/instruction
6. Monitor student progress to inform instruction
7. Use data to make decisions
8. Use assessment for three different purposes (MAASE, p.8, 2007)

It is important for educators to access information about this new initiative, so that we do a better job of educating all children. This article will attempt to describe how a Michigan school district has begun to

implement RTI. Before describing these practices, it is important to understand how “at-risk” students and students with learning disabilities have historically been identified.

Previous Model of Identification

Dr. Samuel Kirk coined the term “learning disabilities” in April of 1963 when he was the head of the Bureau of the Education for the Handicapped. This term quickly caught on with the parents of students who were not primarily blind, deaf, autistic, cognitively impaired, or emotionally impaired. The problem with this new special education label was that educators had a difficult time agreeing on how to identify who these individuals were. Eight years after Kirk’s speech, the educational community decided it was time to begin offering educational services to these individuals who had learning

disabilities. To that end, the first order of business was to agree to a definition. After much haggling and study a definition was adopted that could be broken down into three clauses. These clauses are:

1. **Exclusion Clause:** Students with a learning disability are not experiencing achievement deficits in spoken or written language disorders due to primary deficits in vision, hearing, motor deficits, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or environmental disadvantages.
2. **Discrepancy Clause:** Students with learning disabilities manifest a significant discrepancy between their aptitude as measured by a test of intelligence and one or more areas of achievement in oral language, read language, written language, or mathematics.
3. **Processing Clause:** Students with learning disabilities experience difficulties in one or more of the basic psychological processes used in acquiring the aforementioned language areas.

For the times this definition suited the needs of the educational community because it provided educators with some kind of road map to begin to determine who required special education services as a student with a learning disability and who did not. However, shortly thereafter, questions began to arise as to exactly what constituted a significant discrepancy. Data began to be collected that revealed that as many as 20% of the school population evidenced a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement in some form of language. The number of students who were being found eligible caused many educators to question the validity of this term learning disability. As a result educators began to question the process of identifying students who were not progressing as expected. These questions about identification have resulted in this new model known as RTI.

Experiences with Implementing the RTI Model

The Jenison Public School system of Jenison, Michigan decided to begin implementing the RTI model by piloting system wide screening in kindergarten, first and second grades in reading. Jenison was typical of most school districts in that when a student was not succeeding in the regular education curriculum, the teachers and administrators wanted to provide the student with more support. Often times this meant referring the child for an evaluation to determine if the child qualified for special education services. Jenison began to wonder if there was another more efficient model to

Colleagues, Vol. 3 [2008], Iss. 1, Art. 7 provide this assistance. Their solution was to begin to screen all students in the areas that have become known as the “five big ideas of reading”. These five areas include phonological awareness, alphabetic-phonetic principles, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

The screening is conducted three times a year for all students with the goal to determine if the students in each grade have met the established benchmarks in each of the “big ideas of reading”. Jenison began this process in kindergarten by assessing all students in their ability to name letters fluently, and to identify initial sounds in words. At the beginning of first grade, all students were assessed in their ability to name letters fluently, to segment sounds in words fluently, and to decode nonsense words automatically. In second grade, the students were assessed in their ability to automatically decode nonsense words, and to read a beginning second grade passage fluently. Jenison opted to utilize the Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills more commonly known as the DIBELS measures. It is important to note that these DIBELS measures are not the only measure available to conduct system wide screening. The important point is that the teachers now had an indicator to use that alerted them to the possibility that some students were “at risk” for learning early literacy skills.

As a result of this system wide screening, students were grouped for instructional purposes. The majority of the students met the benchmarks, and these students continued in the core curriculum. Students who did not meet the established benchmarks on each assessment were then targeted for more frequent and intense instruction with the intent that by providing this instruction, most students would achieve the stated benchmarks. This concept of creating different instructional groups is referred to as the three tiered model of instruction. In this three tiered model, the expectation is that eighty percent of the students will achieve the established benchmarks in each area of achievement. With a core curriculum that systematically addresses the skills needed to master the curriculum there should only be twenty percent of the students who do not reach the established benchmarks. Of those twenty percent, fifteen percent should reach the established benchmarks with a bit more frequent instruction. According to this model, one can expect that five percent of the students will need considerably more frequent and intense instruction to reach the established benchmarks. Proponents of this model believe that this five percent of the school population are the students who have significant learning disabilities.

There are two keys to ensuring that this three tiered model is effective for the school

system. The first key is for the school district to evaluate the effectiveness of its core curriculum (the curriculum that all students receive). In reading, an effective core curriculum must address the “five big ideas” of reading in a sequential and systematic manner. It is also important to keep in mind that not every student requires the same intensity of instruction, and the skill of individual teachers to adjust and supplement the curriculum is vital for the both the advanced student and the “at risk” student.

The second key to the success of this three tiered model is the effective use of progress monitoring data. It is imperative that teachers assess the progress of the student who have not met the benchmarks and examine their interventions if no progress can be documented. The purpose of this progress monitoring data is to inform instruction. Once progress has been measured, teachers must utilize instruction that is evidenced based, that is instruction that has been empirically tested and been shown to produce the desired outcome. Likewise for students who have met the benchmarks, teachers need to adjust their instruction so that these students can be challenged at their level of performance.

Lessons Learned

Any time change is initiated, there is much anxiety on the part of administrators and teachers. This was the case in the Jenison school district. As with the case with all new ideas, there were skeptics who believed that this was just another fad in education. To everyone’s credit, however, the majority of the educators committed to learning how to administer the benchmark assessments and the progress monitoring tools. The biggest adjustment has been for the teachers and administrators to utilize the data that has been collected. Assessing students just for the sake of collecting data is a useless endeavor. Administrators and teachers have had to schedule grade level data review meetings to adjust the grouping of students and the instruction that is provided particularly to the students that have not reached the instructional objectives.

Is the RTI model just another fad? Should we measure the achievement of the students who attend our schools? For years, many teachers have been assessing the achievement of their students based on the material that was taught. So, in many ways, this movement is not a new idea. Effective teachers have always reflected on their methods of instruction and these educators have been willing to examine the test scores and adjust accordingly. The Response to Intervention model simply formalizes this process for some educators.