



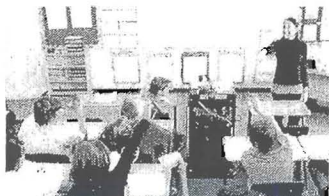
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## Early Warning: December 2010



**A new approach to help students at the first sign of trouble is gaining steam in education.**

By Michelle Exstrom

Picture a school doing everything it can to help struggling students succeed. No child falls further and further behind. And no child falls through the cracks.

It's a place where teachers are trained to step in as soon as a student begins to struggle and help them get back on track. The number of kids in special education drops because staff members intervene before, not after, the student falls too far behind.

If only the education system worked that way. In the real world, teachers lack the training, tools, time and data to regularly monitor how students are doing so they can adjust their instruction. Sometimes, even when a student's early struggle is recognized, teachers and parents have to wait for the student to fail badly enough to get the help they need. Often there is a disincentive for students to dramatically improve because they can lose all the extra help.

Colorado Senator Suzanne Williams spent 20 years as a special education teacher working with struggling students, parents and general classroom teachers.

"I encountered a lot of kids who were borderline," she says. "Many just weren't behind by enough, so we had to wait until they failed to get them the assistance they needed. This was very hard on them to be labeled as failing, and on their parents, too. It just didn't make sense."

And the price of failure is not paid by the students alone. High school dropouts exact a substantial cost on society at large in health care and criminal justice costs, and in lost tax revenue. Dropouts face grim employment prospects and a lifetime of low-paying jobs. The more than 1.2 million students who failed to graduate from high school in 2008 alone represent lost lifetime earnings of nearly \$320 billion.

All that has given added incentive to a relatively new approach some schools are using to try to eliminate some of these obstacles.

The approach, known as Response to Intervention, was born out of years of research on assessments, special education, learning disabilities, measurement of student academic growth and the achievement gap among certain groups of students. In 2004, the federal government first encouraged the approach by letting states use it as an alternative to placing students in special education classes under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It has now become a tool to identify and deal with academic and behavioral problems before students fail. Under the old system, teachers probably didn't know if a student was slipping behind until the problem became obvious or the student began to fail exams. If the student continued to struggle, the usual approach was to test the student to determine the difference between the student's IQ and academic achievement. This approach—referred to as the discrepancy model—meant students weren't eligible to receive services until the gap was big enough. By the time that happened, students often had fallen so far behind that catching up was very difficult.

### Schoolwide Approach

School administrators in different states vary in what they call Response to Intervention and how they make it work. This is because it's a broad approach, not a specific program.

Under the approach, all students receive a high-quality general education curriculum with regular monitoring and assessment. Students who aren't doing well and at risk of failing receive extra help, which can include small-group instruction, customized curriculum and counseling. The few students achieving significantly below grade level or who have serious behavior problems may be put through drills on areas where they are weak. Their performance may be monitored daily to make sure they improve. For other students, teachers create an individual plan to manage their behavior, also monitored daily.

Most experts agree Response to Intervention involves restructuring and realigning schools in a major way by taking a look at the curriculum, instructional practice, leadership, school culture, schedule, staffing, use of data for problem solving, assessments, family and community involvement, and fiscal resources to be successful. This can be difficult and takes a schoolwide effort and commitment. Experts suggest this transition can take three to five years.

"This can be a significant shift from how things worked in the past," says Angela Kirby-Wehr, director of the Harrisburg Pennsylvania Technical Training and Assistance Network, which works with families and local education agencies to provide services to improve student achievement. "Schools are wise to take their time to implement this correctly, to make sure everyone is on board and everyone knows their role."

Those who help schools and districts with the process caution that principals must be strong, committed leaders. They must establish a culture where student performance drives decisions about curriculum and instruction. They must agree

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to use different types of materials and methods to help kids of varying abilities learn. Schools must form a partnership with parents to improve student performance.

"When the entire system is working toward the goal of early intervention, that's when this works," Kirby-Wehr says, emphasizing the importance of a schoolwide effort.

## Most States Are Responding

States across the country are trying their hand at Response to Intervention. Forty-three state education agencies have developed a framework, leaving only six states—Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Vermont—and the District of Columbia without one, according to the National Center on Response to Intervention.

Broad goals and requirements are similar across states. Typically these include universal screening and annual assessments for all students monitoring student progress with interim testing and a strategy to establish the approach in the school. State education agencies establish a broad framework that is flexible and adaptable so it can be customized for each school.

The agencies typically oversee the framework and put the approach into practice. They provide resources, including research and informational materials to policymakers, educators, parents and students about the approach. Professional development for educators is essential and education departments usually provide guidance, materials and intensive training to teachers and school and district leaders.

## Lawmakers' Role

Although education agencies guide the effort to get Response to Intervention established, state legislators play an important role. Lawmakers often include references to the approach in legislation, and it is frequently included in the rules and regulations that guide how schools identify students with learning disabilities, conduct interim and yearly assessments, provide professional development for teachers and set school improvement plans. Lawmakers can remove barriers to give schools flexibility in staffing, curriculum and scheduling.

Legislators also play a role in funding. Currently, there are two federal funding streams—the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—that can be used for putting this approach in place and for training teachers and principals. Lawmakers may want to ensure districts are using that money in the most productive manner.

State legislators also can require that some state money spent for special education, assessments, professional development and school improvement be used to put the approach into effect.

"While it may be OK to leave the implementation process to the state education agency, the legislature needs to direct the policy toward a collaborative and more effective solution to aid struggling students," says North Dakota Representative RaeAnn Kelsch.

"There are numerous barriers that need to be broken down or restructured. Increased professional development and additional training for teaching will be needed and that will mean either additional or the re-direction of funds," she says. "Whenever an appropriation or additional general fund dollars are involved, legislators need to have a say in how best that money will be spent."

## Does It Work?

Research backs up what many intuitively believe: The approach works if used correctly.

In 2008, researchers Charles Hughes and Douglas Dexter published findings from 11 field studies of programs. Despite different approaches, all identified some improvement in student achievement. They also found what's important, if not necessary, for success:

- Extensive, ongoing professional development for teachers.

- Administrative support for staff, scheduling, testing and other changes to make the approach work.

- Teacher support and the ability for administrators and teachers to be flexible in their roles.

- Schoolwide personnel involvement.

- Adequate meeting time for teachers to coordinate their efforts to help kids who are struggling.

Other researchers also are giving the approach high marks. In April 2009, a panel of experts at the What Works Clearinghouse of the federal Institute of Education Sciences published "Assisting Students Struggling with Mathematics: Response to Intervention (RtI) for Elementary and Middle School." The panel gathered the most compelling research about what works to improve student math scores and focused the guide on implementing the approach.

## "Waiting to Fail"

One of the key frustrations for teachers and administrators is a system that requires them to wait for a child to get far behind their peers before they get help.

"I grew very tired of watching kids waiting to fail because that's how the system was designed to work," says Ed Steinberg, assistant commissioner of education in Colorado and a former director of special education for a large suburban school district.

So Colorado lawmakers began working with the education department to change the system. They enacted the Exceptional Children's Educational Act, eliminating the discrepancy formula of IQ vs. achievement, which required a diagnosis of a specific learning disability to receive special education services and led to the "wait to fail" policy.

Now Colorado requires all districts to adopt a Response to Intervention process. State legislation also provided the same flexibility to use the approach and still receive state special education funding as was allowed for federal special education funding.

Since schools that moved students out of special education lost extra federal and state money for those services, lawmakers passed legislation guaranteeing that if the new approach resulted in fewer students moving into special education, funding would not decrease. Instead, the "savings" can be used to support further Response to Intervention efforts.

"You have to remove the barriers to make this work," Steinberg says. "We don't want kids to wait to fail. We want to intervene early. So we couldn't penalize districts for this new approach. This had to happen."

Williams emphasizes the importance of working with the education department.

"We had a failing policy, and we needed a more realistic approach," she says. "We are always looking to make improvements and increase efficiencies, and it just makes sense to partner with the department in those efforts."

Steinberg agrees the partnership with lawmakers was crucial.

"They were the only ones who could put these pieces into place."

*Michelle Exstrom tracks teaching quality issues for NCSL.*

### Indispensable Data

Information is the heart of the Response to Intervention approach.

Educators, students and parents use reliable, up-to-date data about a student's performance.

Aside from classroom observation, information is gathered using 5- to 10-minute computer-adaptive online exams that adjust to his or her level as the student answers the questions. The questions become more difficult for students doing well and easier for those answering incorrectly. The data reported to teachers provides specific information about the student's reading skills, including what literacy components have been mastered and which require more work.

The family of STAR assessments from Renaissance Learning is an example of these programs. They have received high ratings from the National Center on Response to Intervention. Schools using STAR get immediate feedback on individual students and how they can compare to the entire classroom and school. And a principal and superintendent can quickly see how all of their students or students across the district are progressing.

"It just makes sense to use data to guide early intervention instead of waiting for students to fail," says Tom Livezey, superintendent of Oakridge Public Schools in Michigan, who now uses Response to Intervention. He feels strongly that teachers must have the tools to improve student achievement and they can't be successful without immediate data.

State legislators can play a significant role in this area. While much focus has been placed on annual state assessments, lawmakers can ensure schools have the access to tools to measure student achievement often. This can be important for early intervention and measuring teacher and leader performance.

"We've talked a lot about formative assessments in our state from the compliance and accountability standpoint," says Texas Representative Scott Hochberg. "I'm now interested in using it for a learning tool so that we can use data and information to help teachers improve learning rather than use it as a whip and punishment."

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