

# Why Principals Should Adopt

# Schoolwide

# RTI

Without intensive, targeted, and long-term interventions, students' major skill deficits cannot be successfully erased.

BY WAYNE A. CALLENDER

**HOW WELL DOES YOUR** school support the needs of its students? Are supports structured to be immediate, efficient, and effective? Or, are struggling students identified after they experience failure and then processed through a cumbersome child study process that often requires students to “qualify”? Consider which of the following scenarios more closely resembles your school’s approach.

**School A:** Imagine a student starting a new school in late October. The student is assigned a homeroom teacher without the benefit of information from previous schooling. Within two weeks, the teacher identifies a concern with the student’s reading and writing skills and contacts the student’s parents to discuss the matter. Two weeks later, the case is brought before the school’s Child Study Team that recommends various in-class interventions. The interventions consist of extra reading time and after-school tutoring. The after-school tutoring happens only twice because of transportation difficulties. By mid-January, the Child Study Team revisits the case, deems the interventions to have been unsuccessful, and recommends the student for a comprehensive



## Students are provided what they need rather than what is prescribed at their given grade level.

evaluation to determine if she qualifies for more substantial intervention through special education.

In February, the student undergoes a comprehensive evaluation; meanwhile she continues to struggle in the regular classroom. By late March, an eligibility meeting ends with a determination that the student does not meet the eligibility criteria. As a result, the classroom teacher continues to do her best to provide support but has neither the training, time per day, nor appropriate reading intervention tools to have a realistic chance of addressing the problem. Because of unaddressed reading difficulties, the student is unable to fully benefit from daily learning opportunities and therefore falls still further behind.

**School B:** Now imagine that the student is starting at a school with a more proactive approach: a school-wide response to intervention (RTI) structure. Upon enrollment, instead of being initially assigned a classroom, the student is given a brief screening in reading, writing, and math using curriculum-based measurements as her parent completes the enrollment process.

By the time the enrollment process is done, the brief screening is complete. The administrator shares the results with the parent and then gives them to the teacher as the new student enters the classroom. According to the screening results, the student

is two and one-half years behind in reading skills. The teacher instantly knows the student requires substantial intervention to address her deficits. Later that morning, a placement test is administered to identify the specific level of intervention needed. Before the end of the day, the student is receiving intervention that historically would take months or years to secure. Because the school has a proactive support structure with highly effective interventions, the student achieves nearly two years of reading growth by the end of the school year.

Now, which scenario do you want for your school? Which would you choose for your own child? Which would you prefer to work in as a teacher?

### Skill Deficits and Long-Term Implications

Too often, intervention occurs late, is fragmented, and is not supported by the system as a whole. Using traditional intervention structures, struggling students and the educators who support them are unlikely to achieve long-term success. What results is a precarious outcome—"can't do" students become "won't do" students. By the beginning of high school, years of struggle and basic skill deficits set the stage—high school students fail core classes. The Consortium on Chicago School Research describes the "Freshman Year: The Make-it or Break-it Year" in a 2007 report. If students receive one semester F, the likelihood of graduating goes from 83 percent to 60 percent. Three semester F's and the chances of graduating falls to 31 percent. What do students failing core classes most often have in common? Basic skill deficits in reading and math.

Few high schools are set up to address the underlying reasons why students fail. Tutoring, help with homework, and study skills are the most common remedies applied, yet they do little to address skill deficits that drive student failure—the same deficits that have been in the making since kindergarten.



With good intentions, elementary and middle schools also have structures that go through the motions of intervention but fail to have lasting effects. In a typical school in which the percentage of students in each risk category remains constant as students progress through grades, intervention is often a series of unrelated strategies taught in isolation for 30 minutes per day with little to no reinforcement or connection to the rest of the school day. Moreover, interventions fail to be adequately differentiated and violate critical principles of intervention such as repetition, scaffolding, modeling, and correction procedures. Without a systematic protocol for carrying out intensive, targeted, and long-term (years as opposed to weeks or months) interventions coordinated from grade to grade, teachers have little hope of addressing the problems that interfere with graduation years down the road. In schools with systematic schoolwide structures of support, coordinated from grade to grade and carried out across all school environments, the percentage of at-risk students decreases from grade to grade as the percentage of students at benchmark increases.

### Schoolwide Support Structures

To be successful and sustainable, schools must have support systems that differentiate according to student needs. The most important rule is that one size does not fit all, meaning that



students are provided what they need rather than what is necessarily prescribed at their given grade level. Lessons from schools with longstanding RTI systems suggest that differentiated systems must be established to carry out varying levels of instructional support to meet the needs of all students. Such a structure is designed around student needs, from the high-achieving student to the learning disabled. The school:

- Uses a tiered approach for addressing student needs;
- Maximizes the use of regular and special education resources for the benefit of all students;

- Assesses students for the purpose of instructional decision-making through screening, diagnosis, and progress monitoring;
- Adopts interventions and instructional practices that are based in scientific research—those that have been demonstrated to work; and
- Places emphasis on evaluating and improving system and instructional effectiveness rather than focusing solely on individual student RTI and the accompanying assumption that something is wrong with the child.

### Walk to Read

To illustrate how some schools

accomplish differentiated instruction and intervention, here are two examples of a “Walk to Read” approach to reading instruction.

In the first example, three third-grade classrooms have a 90-minute block for reading instruction. For the first 30 minutes, students remain with their homeroom teachers who read aloud and introduce key vocabulary tied to the core reading curriculum. Even students far below grade level participate and benefit from hearing the vocabulary and stories.

After 30 minutes, Walk to Read begins. Intensive students from all three classrooms walk to one

## Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Instructional Recommendation

	Intensive	Strategic			Benchmark	Benchmark (Advanced)
Instructional Focus	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Skill Deficit(s)</b>	Deficits in multiple areas of reading (5 big ideas)	Student fails specific areas of phonics screener	Student passes everything except multi-syllable words	Student passes all areas of phonics screener	Student does not pass theme skill tests, end of unit assessments, etc.	Student passes theme skill tests, end of unit assessments, etc.
<b>Student Instructional Needs</b>	Coordinated instruction across all five areas of reading	Areas failed on phonic screener	Muti-syllable decoding skills	Automaticity with connected text (fluency)	Re-teaching using content from core / supplemental material and more practice	Advanced or challenge activities
<b>Instructional Time/Format</b>	60 + min. Small group	30 min. Small group*	30 min. Small group*	20+ min. Small group*	30 min. Small group*	30 min. Small group*
	“Alternate Core”	Core and “Core Plus”				
<b>Programs/Materials</b>	Reading Mastery  Corrective Reading	Phonics for Reading or Alternate Core	Rewards/Rewards Plus	Read Naturally, Six Minute Solution, fluency building opportunities (partner reading, etc.)	Re-teaching using content from core program or supplemental materials	Core program, advanced learning activities (vocabulary, etc.)

\*Small group instruction incorporated into 90-minute reading block

© Wayne Callender.



classroom, and the Benchmark and Strategic students are evenly distributed into two classrooms. In the Intensive classroom, students are placed in a highly structured reading program that adheres to the critical instructional design principles. Such a program is often referred to as an “alternate core” because it addresses all five of the big ideas in reading. Although all Intensive students are in the same intervention, they place at different levels according to their skill development. In this example, the range of student skills requires a minimum of three instructional groups. Each group is homogeneous according to skill, but also flexible (meaning students are able to move up and down according to their needs and progress). Each group is set up and planned to promote maximum growth toward closing the achievement gap through up to two years growth per year.

The three Intensive groups require one classroom teacher and two additional instructors. As a result, the special education teacher and Title I teacher “push in” to teach one of the three groups (to accommodate all students, the school uses a staggered reading schedule). For 60 minutes, each group completes one or more lessons in the intervention, according to their established pacing schedule.

---

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/MarApr12](http://www.naesp.org/MarApr12)

➤ Get guidance on effective RTI implementation from the **RTI Action Network**.

➤ Discover RTI resources and training opportunities on the **Partners for Learning** website.

➤ The **Florida Center for Reading Research Center** website includes free reading instruction and assessment activities that can be downloaded for classroom use, including Walk to Read Centers.

Whereas the special education teacher’s group may include students who do not have an individualized education plan (IEP), the regular classroom teacher’s group may include students with an IEP. Students in all groups have like skills and instructional needs, so this instruction also meets IEP reading requirements for the special education students.

Within the two Benchmark/Strategic classrooms, the teachers use both whole group and small group instruction. Small group instruction features centers with 15-minute rotations. Centers allow for teacher-led instruction and reinforcement of previously taught skills. The centers include: vocabulary work, fluency practice, challenge activities, phonic skill development, partner reading, inquiry stations, and reader’s theater. Students are assigned to centers based on instructional needs. Not all students attend all centers. Both teachers reassign centers once a month based on ongoing assessments of students’ instructional needs.

### Another Route

In the second Walk to Read example, the 2 hour and 5 minute reading block is divided differently among the Benchmark, Strategic, and Intensive classes. The Benchmark and Strategic classes, each in a separate classroom, spend the first hour doing core reading as a class. They then have a 15-minute recess. Afterwards, these two classes are grouped by instructional needs using the differentiation protocol in the table on page 11.

The Benchmark class spends 1 hour and 5 minutes in small groups and in independent time, including opportunities for challenge for advanced students. The Strategic class divides the remaining 1 hour and 5 minutes into three small groups, for targeted instruction (one led by the teacher, one led by an assistant, and one working independently, according to their instructional needs identified on the differentiation protocol). This targeted instruction occurs for 30 minutes, followed by 35

minutes of meeting with the teacher in small groups or working independently.

The four groups in the Intensive classroom rotate between teacher-led and independent groups. A classroom teacher and teacher assistant work with two groups of students, while two groups work independently completing workbook activities and reading stories relating to their specific intervention lesson from the previous day. After 30 minutes the groups switch— independent groups become teacher led while teacher-led groups switch to being independent. After the 15-minute recess, the teacher, Title I teacher, and two assistants teach all four groups. In this manner, each group completes two lessons per day, achieving two years growth in one academic year. Afterwards, a 30-minute whole group read-aloud and vocabulary session concludes the reading block.

### Time to Act

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, more than 7,000 students drop out of high school each day. Evidence suggests that if we act early and in the most effective manner, we can identify and address the skill deficits that are so commonly associated with student failure during high school. Yet without a proactive, schoolwide approach, teachers will continue to work alone to provide interventions that have a questionable chance and previously poor track record of success.

As principal, you can decide how to arrange your building to support students and teachers. You can develop a tiered structure to support individualized student instructional needs that does not, by design, assume one size fits all. As principal, you can arrange your school to reflect the importance of success in educating children and the difficulty of achieving that success if teachers are working alone. □

---

**Wayne A. Callender** is the founder of Partners for Learning, which provides RTI-related professional development to teachers and administrators.