Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-year effort that attends to the needs of all students, helps students transition at key junctures, and builds professionalism when implemented thoughtfully. What can a principal do to nurture a successful RTI effort for learners?

RTI at Eastport Elementary
In order to support all students and teachers, RTI must be comprehensive and systemic in nature when it comes to language and literacy assessment and instruction. With this in mind, leaders at Eastport Elementary School (a pseudonym), a large, diverse urban school in a mid-Atlantic state, implemented a plan of transformation. At the district level, an RTI coordinator supported RTI efforts with resources, training, and expertise. At the school level, administrators and teachers developed an approach to RTI that complemented the school culture and diversity. RTI teams were formed across every two grade levels (kindergarten/first, second/third, and fourth/fifth). Teams met weekly, and included the principal or assistant principal, reading specialists, special educators, instructional coaches, teachers, and the school psychologist.

All Eastport Elementary stakeholders understood that a strong foundation at the classroom level is most crucial for student success. Priority was placed on high-quality, differentiated, core classroom instruction (Tier I). Further, the Eastport Elementary faculty agreed that using informal and formal assessment data to inform teaching decisions was vital to ensure that instruction was effective in improving the literacy learning of each student.

The Eastport Elementary team developed a systematic approach for meeting students who had needs beyond the scope of a Tier I classroom setting; Tier II strategic instruction and Tier III intensive instruction were designed. Teachers actively participated in a data-driven, step-by-step process led by instructional coaches and reading specialists. Based on screening assessments and diagnostic data, students were strategically placed into small group instruction, in addition to that of the Tier I differentiated instruction.

All professionals at Eastport Elementary participated in RTI in order to provide these two additional levels of intervention instruction. Reading specialists, special educators, ELL teachers, gifted teachers, classroom teachers and specialists teachers (e.g., PE, music, and art) devoted 30 minutes to small group (Tier II) or one-on-one instruction (Tier III) at the end of each day. Small group instruction was tailored to students’ literacy needs. This model capitalized on the skills of educators, time, and resources, as it targeted the needs of each student.

Students’ progress was monitored on a weekly basis within the small group settings. Special RTI team meetings were held at least once each quarter to report on the larger patterns of literacy learning, make decisions about instruction, and adjust student placements within small groups. As a result, teachers were familiar with the routines, respected the expectations, and embraced the support system provided. Active participation and collaboration became key to the RTI process.

Administrators at Eastport Elementary provided teachers with common planning periods each day and met with teachers weekly to discuss professional topics such as goals and characteristics of schools that “beat the odds.” Ongoing professional development was initially provided by district leaders and faculty from two nearby universities, including workshops followed by classroom modeling, planning and problem-solving meetings with teachers, and observations structured to offer instructional feedback and support. University faculty and teacher volunteers also co-planned and co-conducted professional development for sustainability, ensuring the process would remain in place when the university faculty was no longer involved with the process.

10 Action Steps
Based on Eastport Elementary’s experiences, school leaders should remember these key points when organizing
and maintaining a systemic, comprehensive approach to RTI.

1. Obtain teacher buy-in. Conduct an audit. What is currently in place within your school that can be assimilated into the school’s RTI model?

2. Develop a common language. Develop a language within the school culture that is student-centered, data-driven, and tailored to your specific school needs. When everyone speaks the same language, collaboration is strengthened to meet the needs of students.

3. Think of long term solutions, not quick fixes. Many schools with high-needs populations try to use “quick-fix” solutions, such as purchasing commercially-made materials, instead of investing in the development of the faculty. Too many initiatives can fragment the comprehensive system and can lead to a loss of focus and lack of instructional responsibility by teachers.

4. Foster collaboration. Encourage and facilitate collaboration among teachers, reading specialists, special educators, school psychologists, and building leaders for a systemic, comprehensive RTI approach. Work as a team to develop systems for screening students, facilitating best practice instruction at all tiers, and conducting progress monitoring.

5. Focus on instructional time. Principals must protect teachers’ instructional time by focusing on targeted goals and clear expectations. The instructional schedule should allow teachers to frequently visit with each of their students one-on-one or in small groups.

6. Use data to drive instruction. Do not ignore the important role of data. Ask, according to data, what are students’ most pressing literacy needs in the primary grades and upper elementary? Revisit school-wide data periodically and present the analysis to the faculty. Celebrate successes and target weaknesses in explicit, collaborative ways.

7. Support continuous professional development. Sustainability of a dynamic framework such as RTI requires a long-term vision and careful support. Teachers must have ongoing professional development. Sustained learning opportunities need to be provided for teachers to deepen their knowledge of content and pedagogy.

8. Schedule wisely. Arrange schedules to capitalize on the professional expertise and resources available within your building. Common planning periods, weekly professional meetings, and schoolwide intervention time allotments are critical.

9. Stress differentiation as an essential component of RTI. Look for differentiated instruction during classroom observations. Incorporating small group instruction is an important way to create an overall classroom learning environment to support this endeavor. Using learning centers allows students to work independently on aspects of reading and writing tailored to their needs.

10. Reinforce the bottom line: “All for all.” Student success should be the focus of all educators. Effective implementation of RTI allows a structure to meet students where their needs are, preventing difficulties.

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Eastport Elementary’s leadership was key to its successful implementation of an RTI framework aimed at addressing the needs of ALL students. Principals must lead and facilitate the RTI process with support for professional learning to build teachers’ knowledge, careful scheduling and allocation of resources, and creating a common language for differentiated, data-driven instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Student achievement improved as a result of using this RTI framework, with shifts occurring after a two year period for students in grades 3-5. For example, only 15 percent of third-grade students resided solely in Tier I instruction at the beginning of RTI implementation, but after implementing major shifts in basic classroom instruction to address student needs, 49 percent of students resided solely in Tier I after one year.

Likewise, 26 percent of students needed Tier III intervention at the beginning of the implementation process, with only 10 percent needing Tier III intervention instruction after one year of implementation. In essence, the number of students whose needs were met primarily by quality classroom instruction increased, while the number of students needing intervention decreased over time. Similar shifts and trends were reflected in data for fourth and fifth graders as well. Such changes illuminate the possibilities for student success when RTI is thoughtfully implemented by instructional leaders.

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