A Step-By-Step Guide to Response to Intervention
The summer before the 2003-2004 school year, I was contacted by a district director of exceptional student education (ESE) about participating in a new program. She described it as a problem-solving method that would help us identify and provide interventions for K-2 students who were not making adequate progress in reading. The district would allocate two psychologists and a reading specialist to work with us one day a week at no charge to my budget. It was an offer too good to pass up, and that phone call was the start of implementing the response to intervention (RTI) approach at Cheney Elementary School in Orlando, Florida.

After six years of changes and challenges, RTI has had a major impact at a Florida school.

Lorrie Butler
What Is Response to Intervention?

In *Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation*, George Batsche and his colleagues define RTI as “the practice of providing high-quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and using learning rate over time and level of performance to make important educational decisions.” In an RTI model, instruction for students is divided into tiers. Tier 1 is basic instruction for all students, using a scientifically based core program. When students are not successful with Tier 1 instruction, they are screened for participation in a Tier 2 reading intervention program. Students who are not making adequate progress are discussed among a team of selected school personnel. At Cheney, the decision to move a student to Tier 2 is determined by a team comprising the school psychologist, reading specialist, regular education teacher, an ESE teacher, and the principal. In making that decision, we apply a four-step process with each step requiring a question that must be answered:

1. **What is the problem?** According to Batsche et al., a problem exists when there is a “discrepancy between a desired state and what is occurring.” For example, a first-grade student achieves a score of 3 in phoneme segmentation fluency on the first screening by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), when the goal was for the student to score 35 or above.

2. **Why is this happening?** Is this happening to several students in the class? Maybe there is a problem with the fidelity of implementation or perhaps the core program doesn’t adequately focus on the skill. Maybe the child missed out on instruction due to absences or didn’t master the prerequisite skills.

3. **What are we going to do about it?** The team develops a plan that provides a targeted intervention for the specific skill. The plan identifies the intervention, who will be responsible for administering it, how often progress monitoring will occur, and what instrument will be used.

4. **Did the plan work?** Once the plan is implemented and the student receives Tier 2 instruction, the team meets again to answer this question. If the plan worked, the student no longer receives the intervention. If the plan did not work, then the team begins the problem-solving steps over again, with instruction becoming progressively more intense until the student is reading on grade level or until it is determined that the student may need the services provided by special education.

Learning From Experience

I spent my first year as principal of Cheney Elementary in 2001 asking teachers what they did for students struggling to learn to read. When asked if the measures they were using made the student successful, the answer was usually no. So that year we began identifying intervention programs and developing a plan to provide intervention for struggling readers.

The following year, we identified at-risk students by using individual student reading data from various sources. In the intermediate grades, we used information from our SuccessMaker computer software program, Degrees of Reading Power test scores, and data from our Houghton Mifflin core reading program. In the primary grades, we used data from the DIBELS testing instrument and from the Houghton Mifflin program. Because the Houghton Mifflin intervention programs were designed to help students no more than one year below level, we selected a direct instruction program, Reading Mastery, for the students who were further behind. My teachers were enthusiastic about the intervention programs once we were able to work with schedules to squeeze them in. Groups of older students were pulled out in the afternoon and taught by paraprofessionals and instructional support teachers. Students in primary grades were taught in groups by their teachers while their other students were working inde-
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pendently. If a teacher had only one or two students needing interventions, those students would join another class for the instruction.

**Meeting the Challenges**

One challenge I faced as principal was in articulating to our teachers how RTI was going to work in our building. I knew I could count on them to use data to identify struggling students and to provide interventions in the classrooms. The big issue was explaining how the interventions would be used with tiers of progressively more intense instruction and how it all related to the identification of students with specific learning disabilities. Our teachers were accustomed to having students tested for ESE services when the only interventions provided had been modifications in their workload and individual assistance from para-professionals. RTI would be a different and challenging approach. I needed to build an understanding of why our current IQ/achievement model of identifying students with disabilities was not the best method. We had conversations about the fact that RTI did not mean that students would no longer be placed in ESE. It just meant that by the time the student was tested, we would be pretty sure that he or she really needed the services. Once presented with the research and the opportunity for discussion, the teachers understood and agreed that the changes we were making were in the best interest of our students.

RTI also was difficult for me as the instructional leader during the early years of implementation. I had not anticipated the amount of my time and energy that would need to be directed to this initiative. The district team came to my school once a week, and I found that I had to commit to meeting with them. Many times, decisions had to be made that only I could make, and my absence meant a delay in moving forward.

One of the biggest challenges we encountered that first year was training.
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No one in my school had been trained in RTI and the problem-solving method, so the district team had to teach our leadership team, which then designed professional development training for our teachers. Not only were we training them in RTI, but we were also making changes to the instructional materials we were using. I had to make sure that every time we asked the teachers to use a new strategy or new intervention materials, I provided learning time for them (and for me, if necessary). I also had to arrange coaching for our teachers to ensure that they were teaching the materials with fidelity.

As we moved further into the process, I realized that I had to be present at every student’s problem-solving meeting. I needed to lead the staff in understanding that these meetings were different from the old educational planning team meetings, which usually rubber-stamped ESE testing for students. In problem-solving meetings, I was the coach and cheerleader, the person who held everyone accountable for doing what we said we were going to do in the plans designed for individual students.

During the past few years, RTI has been easier as the staff and I have become more proficient with the process. I am still the coach, cheerleader, and accountability person, but problem-solving meetings can be held without me if necessary.

Another hurdle that I faced during implementation, and continue to work with, is RTI funding. Since we have moved past the initial implementation phase, we no longer have two psychologists assigned to our school. However, the district has assigned a school psychologist to us two days per week, and we continue to be assigned a district-level reading specialist. What the district has not been able to provide is additional funding to help purchase materials for intervention or professional development. As a result, I have allocated money from my general budget as well as Title I, and School Improvement funding for materials and training. To keep the cost of substitute teachers down, whenever possible I schedule training on our students’ early-release days. Funding doesn’t have to be a barrier to RTI, but it does have to be a consideration.

Looking Ahead

According to the Florida Department of Education, implementation of an RTI model generally takes three to six years. At Cheney, we have just completed our sixth year. It has been a challenging but worthwhile journey. RTI has made a positive impact on the education of all our students. The number of referrals for testing for possible exceptional education services has been reduced from 58 in the 2004-2005 school year to 11 in 2008-2009. I will continue to work with the staff to refine and improve our RTI model because it has demonstrated that it can help us meet our goal of academic success for all children.

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WEB RESOURCES

The National Resource Center on Learning Disabilities offers several resources about response to intervention such as a resource kit and relevant articles. [www.nrclD.org/topics/RTI.html](http://www.nrclD.org/topics/RTI.html)

The National Center on Response to Intervention is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and provides information and resources, including webinars. [www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)
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