

West Virginia Response to Intervention Project

Frequently Asked Questions



Building Better Readers...

RtI

**West Virginia Department of Education
Division of Instructional Services
Office of Special Education
October 2005**

Foreword

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004* (IDEA) provides school districts the opportunity to develop research-based procedures for determining whether a student has a specific learning disability. Traditional identification procedures have resulted in a “wait to fail” approach to meeting the needs of struggling learners. Consequently, students did not receive appropriate intervention for reading difficulties until well after their peers mastered basic reading competencies.

Response to Intervention (RtI) is about building better readers in the early grades and consists of multi-tiered reading instruction in the general education classroom. In an RtI model, **ALL** students receive high quality reading instruction and struggling readers receive additional and increasingly more intense intervention. Early intervention and prevention of reading difficulties are fundamental to the process. However, if a student’s learning history and classroom performance warrant, a multidisciplinary team may determine the student has a disability and needs special education services to ensure continued and appropriate academic progress.

The West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Special Education, has initiated the Response to Intervention Pilot Project in eleven elementary schools across the state. The project holds the promise of increasing achievement for *all* students with the ancillary benefit of appropriately identifying students with specific learning disabilities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven L. Paine". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Dr. Steven L. Paine
State Superintendent of Schools

1. What is meant by Response to Intervention (RtI)?

According to current early reading research, all except a very few children can become competent readers by the end of the third grade. RtI is a process that provides immediate intervention to struggling students at the first indication of failure to learn. Through systematic screening of all students in the early grades, classroom teachers identify those who are not mastering critical reading skills and provide differentiated intervention to small groups of students. Continuous progress monitoring of students' responses to those interventions allows teachers to identify students in need of additional intervention and to adjust instruction accordingly.

2. Why has the WVDE initiated the West Virginia Response to Intervention (WVRtI) Project?

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) states that for the purpose of determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, the school district "may use a process which determines if a child responds to a scientific, research based intervention as part of its evaluation procedures." (§614(b)(6)). Under RtI, formal, standardized diagnostic evaluations to determine a student's need for specially designed instruction through special education services are provided for only those students who show continuous skill deficits after receiving intense, small group intervention instruction. Data collected as a result of systematic screening of early literacy skills and progress monitoring to determine the effectiveness of interventions will also assist in determining whether a student's difficulties should be attributed to the presence of a specific learning disability.

3. What are the goals of the pilot?

The primary goal of the WVRtI Project is to increase reading skills for all students in grades K-3 by implementing a Three-Tier Reading model. A secondary goal of this process is to appropriately identify for special education only those students who still have not mastered grade level reading skills after receiving additional, small group reading instruction focused on deficit skills. Ultimately, the pilot project will yield valuable guidance and assistance for school districts toward the eventual statewide implementation of RtI for the identification of students with learning disabilities.

4. Who is involved in the project?

The West Virginia Response to Intervention Project includes eleven elementary schools in nine counties across the state. Over 3,000 students and approximately 150 teachers are involved during the 2005-2006 school year.

5. How have children been identified under the category of specific learning disabilities?

The process for determining the presence of a specific learning disability has involved the use of an intelligence-achievement discrepancy criterion for many years. This method has been widely criticized as the “wait-to-fail” method since students rarely qualify for special education services until third or fourth grade. Intensive reading instruction is often delayed until well after typically developing readers have mastered the reading process. Furthermore, the discrepancy model does not necessarily distinguish between those students who fail due to inadequate reading instruction and those who possess disorders in one or more of the psychological processes involved in using language and manifested in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations.

6. Why replace the discrepancy model with RtI?

Response to Intervention offers the promise of “building better readers” through the provision of differentiated instruction based on data from ongoing assessments for all students in the early grades. That is, all students receive scientifically research based reading instruction and, most importantly, struggling readers receive additional instructional time and research based reading interventions within the structure and context of the general education classroom. In essence, RtI replaces the practice of “waiting to fail” with deliberate early intervention and prevention.

7. What is the Three-Tier model?

The Three-Tier Reading model is the instructional model being used for the WVRtI initiative. This model is designed to meet the needs of all young readers, including those who are slow starters in kindergarten and those who continue to struggle in the early elementary grades. The Three-Tier model is a prevention model intended to catch students before they fail and to provide the supports students need to learn to read during the early years of schooling. Research and practical experience have shown that waiting for students to “catch on” or “catch up” does not lead to higher student achievement. Students need explicit, targeted instruction and intervention to succeed.

8. What is the focus of Tier 1?

Tier 1 is designed to meet the needs of a majority of the school population and has three critical elements: a) a research-based core reading program, b) benchmark testing of students at least three times a year to determine their instructional needs, and c) sustained professional development to equip teachers with tools necessary for teaching reading effectively. In Tier 1, the classroom teacher delivers to all students at least 90 uninterrupted minutes of core instruction in the five components essential to early reading: phonemic awareness, phonics and word study, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension. Benchmark testing using the DIBELS (See Question 10.) allows teachers to monitor student progress and, in response to testing results, differentiate instruction for students who do not meet grade-level expectations. Teachers ensure that small groups of students receive targeted skills instruction through the use of flexible grouping arrangements in the classroom.

9. What is meant by the term “flexible grouping”?

Flexible grouping refers to using assessment data to target specific skills for instruction. Students who require additional instruction on similar reading skills are grouped for a period of time. As students master the target skills, new groups are formed. Groups are created and recreated in response to student needs and, therefore, are considered flexible.

10. What is DIBELS?

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills. Classroom teachers use DIBELS data to determine which skills are lacking, where to begin focused instruction and whether the student’s skills are improving as a result of the intervention instruction.

11. What is the focus of Tier 2?

Tier 2 is for students who are falling behind on reading skills and need additional help, or intervention, to meet grade-level expectations. Students in Tier 2 receive specialized scientifically based reading instruction in a small group setting (3-5 students) for at least 30 minutes a day **in addition to** the 90 minutes of daily uninterrupted reading instruction. The progress of each student on target skills (i.e., the skills that have not been mastered) is monitored every two to three weeks in order to adjust instruction and ensure learning.

12. What is progress monitoring?

Progress monitoring refers to the systematic and continuous collection of intervention data. Progress monitoring is primarily for students who are receiving additional intervention instruction and is conducted at least every three weeks. The purpose of progress monitoring is to assist teachers in determining whether a child is making adequate progress as a result of targeted intervention instruction. In the WVRTI Project, teachers use DIBELS assessments to monitor progress.

13. What is the focus of Tier 3?

Tier 3 is designed for students who still have considerable difficulty in mastering necessary reading skills, even after Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. Students receive a minimum of two daily 30-minute sessions in addition to the core reading instruction (which all students receive as part of Tier 1). The instruction in Tier 3 is conducted in small homogeneous groups, i.e., groups of *less than five* students, all of whom are having similar difficulties in learning to read. Instruction is very explicit and intensive, and the progress of each student is monitored twice a month in order to adjust instruction and ensure learning.

14. What is meant by the term intervention?

Intervention means extra help or extra instruction that is targeted specifically to skills that a student has not acquired. Intervention is typically used in connection with instruction in Tiers 2 and 3. During intervention time, the teacher selects approaches that reach students while providing numerous opportunities for practice, feedback and error correction. Options teachers can use to adjust the intervention include increasing time allowed for intervention, decreasing group size, changing materials or strategies, or moving students to a different group.

15. How do Tier 2 and Tier 3 differ?

Tier 3 differs from Tier 2 in several ways. Tier 3 provides a) even more time for instruction, b) a smaller group size, c) ongoing adjustment of instruction to meet the needs of students, and d) a duration of instruction that may last months or years.

The time students spend in Tier 2 is flexible. After a round of Tier 2 instruction (a round may last 8, 10 or 12 weeks), a decision is made about the student's instructional needs. The options for the student include exiting Tier 2, continuing with another round of Tier 2 intervention, beginning Tier 3, and/or being referred for special education services.

16. Who provides the instruction and/or interventions at each tier?

In Tier 1, the general education classroom teacher provides the instruction on the core reading program along with any intervention, or additional help, that students need. In Tiers 2 and 3, personnel as determined by the school deliver the intervention to students. These personnel can include classroom teachers, specialized reading teachers, reading coaches, Title I reading teachers, and special education teachers.

17. What factors should a school or district consider before implementing RtI?

Of primary importance is an assurance that school staff and school and district leaders are committed to making RtI work to address the needs of struggling readers. Educators must recognize the need for a different and more powerful way of teaching reading to guarantee that all students learn how to read.

After the initial commitment is made, a school or school district must focus on implementing *initial* and *sustained* professional development for teachers on the five critical components of early reading. Other issues, no less important, that must be discussed and resolved include how to optimize the use of staff time and student time, how to provide the materials necessary for scientifically based core instruction and targeted intervention, how to ensure funding, and how to provide ongoing leadership and support as RtI is established in the school and district.

18. What skills and knowledge are required for teachers to implement RtI?

The foundation of the Three-Tier model is scientifically based instruction organized around the five components essential to early reading: phonemic awareness, phonics and word study, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension. General education classroom teachers must be prepared with knowledge about how students learn to read, materials that help address all five areas of reading, and techniques and strategies that help students develop grade level reading skills. The interventionists, or those who provide extra help and extra time to students in Tier 2 and Tier 3, must have this same knowledge. In addition, the interventionists must know how to use materials, strategies and techniques that target specific reading difficulties. All educators, whether providing instruction in Tier 1, 2 or 3, must know how to assess student progress and use assessment data to adjust instruction and develop effective interventions.

19. How will use of the RtI process affect special education referrals?

IDEA 2004 does not exclude or remove the use of a discrepancy model to identify students with specific learning disabilities and allows for the use of RtI data as part of the special education referral and evaluation process. Districts have the opportunity to use the rich assessment data collected by teachers from the RtI process to assist in making eligibility decisions. Final regulations to implement IDEA 2004 may clarify this process further.

Evaluation of the RtI will include information gained about student progress through the Three-Tier model as part of the eligibility determination for specific learning disabilities. It is expected that because students receive scientifically based instruction and focused intervention in the RtI model, the number of students inappropriately referred to special education (due to, for example, lack of high quality instruction in reading) will decline.

Ultimately, students should be more accurately diagnosed for specific learning disabilities and the needs of those without learning disabilities will continue to be met through the core instruction and subsequent intervention instruction in Tiers 1 and 2.

The RtI process does not preclude a parent's or teacher's right to request a multidisciplinary evaluation for the purpose of determining a student's eligibility for special education.

20. What does use of the RtI process mean for teachers?

An RtI outcome vital to the effectiveness of a school system, is that ***all teachers***, both general and special educators, will feel an increased accountability for student learning as well as strengthened confidence in their own skills and knowledge related to teaching reading. The goal of all students learning to read will be a unifying force that includes all staff and all students. All teachers will see themselves as part of a system that delivers high quality instruction that continually assesses student progress and that provides extra help and extra time to meet the needs of students.

If we are to close the achievement gap in West Virginia's schools, roles of school personnel will change. Collaboration among teachers will increase in order to determine students needs, designate resources and maximize student learning. Genuine access to and participation in the general curriculum for students with disabilities may require a shift in the way we think about and ultimately provide special education and related services. Building better readers must become the collective responsibility of all teachers so that all students achieve.