

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

**Intensifying Literacy Instruction in
the Context of Tiered Interventions
A View From Special Educators**

It is vital that teachers know (a) how to identify students who need help, (b) what help to provide them, and (c) how to access appropriate resources for supports within their school and district.

Successful implementation of intervention strategies for students having difficulties with reading is highly dependent on teachers' knowledge. Curricula alone do not teach; skilled teachers know how to prioritize learning objectives. For students who are struggling, or who have reading disabilities, including dyslexia, it is vital that teachers know (a) how to identify students who need help, (b) what help to provide them, and (c) how to access appropriate resources for supports within their school and district.

Strong teacher preparation programs prepare their candidates with knowledge to guide their practice, but they also provide many types of opportunities for candidates to practice or apply their coursework and receive supportive feedback. Preparation programs vary along a developmental continuum from preservice teacher training to graduate specialized training programs that include job-embedded activities.

Preservice teachers can benefit from watching faculty model literacy lessons, watching video exemplars, and practicing teaching with peers. Initially, they may follow relatively scripted lesson plans with struggling or typical learners and eventually develop their own lesson plans for whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction. More experienced teachers returning for graduate or certification programs may benefit from trying evidence-based practices within their own classroom setting.

Ideally, preservice and inservice teachers have supervision from higher education faculty in person or remotely through technologies that allow a supervisor to observe via conferencing or to observe video clips. Within the university setting, teachers benefit from watching videos of their own and their peers' teaching as a type of a community of practice that supports reflection and rehearsal. Some recent innovations involve virtual reality simulations that allow a preservice teacher to try out lesson plans with a virtual student, receive feedback from peers and faculty, and to reflect and replan prior to delivering a lesson to a student. Some of these innovations also facilitate teachers' self-efficacy for teaching diverse learners and managing classroom behavior in order to keep students engaged and motivated.

Teacher Knowledge and Skills for Intensification

Although schools vary in the resources and programs to intensify interventions, when student data indicate a lack of adequate progress, school-level supports for teachers include the following:

- Developing and maintaining a strong learning environment
- Setting clear implementation goals
- Selecting evidence-based programs that are aligned across tiers of support
- Having reliable and sensitive assessments with management systems that make the data accessible and actionable
- Protecting time for teams of educators to meet regularly to work and learn
- Creating joint accountability for growth toward goals

In addition to these more general system supports, teachers can individualize interventions to provide even more explicit and systematic instruction, ensure frequent opportunities for student response, give specific and immediate corrective feedback, support positive approaches to learning and behavioral supports, and teach transfer of skills. (See the sidebar at the end of this brief for web-based resources that support professional development and professional learning communities about intensive interventions.)

In the domain of foundational reading, teachers can intensify literacy instruction by using student data to guide decisions. For example, teachers can model how to blend and segment words using sound-by-sound, or synthetic, phonics approaches. They can show how these approaches apply to spelling words. They may also use a curriculum-based measure to determine students' ability to correctly name letter sounds or an informal phonics inventory to see if students can identify the first sound in a word or are already able to blend sounds to read words with short-vowel patterns. For emerging bilinguals, teachers can show what transfers across languages and what does not.

Using student performance data can help teachers create specially designed instruction that is tailored to address individual needs. Teachers can carefully build from easier skills to harder ones to alleviate anxiety or frustration and to build

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students' success and self-efficacy. If data from teacher observation indicate students are struggling in the domain of reading comprehension, teachers can intensify by breaking a complex task, such as sequencing, within a text structure intervention into smaller steps that are easier to master. This might involve devoting extra attention to developing relevant vocabulary, engaging background knowledge, and using a graphic organizer that concretely represents the steps good readers take to retell or write about the most important big ideas in a text. Teachers can also carefully select texts so students can read fluently enough to apply comprehension strategies and so students can relate to the characters and setting or concepts to use their own background knowledge and draw inferences.

Effective teachers also intensify by using positive behavior supports to maximize student engagement and by motivating students to practice key skills. Students with intensive needs also benefit from immediate feedback that is specific, supportive, and corrective. Such feedback helps students learn what they did that worked to improve their performance (e.g., paying attention, taking corrective feedback, organizing materials, sticking with a task, applying strategies) or what they need to do differently to improve reading (e.g., avoiding distractions to persist with a challenging task).

For example, teachers can help students set a learning goal and track progress toward their goal (e.g., "By using my new strategies about finding the roots in words, I will read and spell more words correctly this week."). Teachers can show students better approaches to learning by explaining the relation between their effort and practice and their growth and progress (e.g., "I saw that when you came to a word you did not know, you used a strategy you learned last week about root words. I heard you think aloud about a related and familiar word. Those two steps helped you pay attention to using the parts of the word and finding the meaning.")

Teachers can also intensify by helping students apply, or transfer, what they have learned in one domain to another, such as reading to writing, or from one genre of literature to another. We encourage interested educators to explore the various resources available at www.intensiveintervention.org for a deeper dive into increasing intensity of literacy interventions using data-based individualization.

Tiers of Instruction and Intensive Interventions

Efforts to provide intensive interventions to support students not yet making expected progress in literacy have proliferated since the passage of two critical pieces of legislation in the United States:

- The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), which required schools to provide strong reading instruction and allowed them to implement systems for Response to Intervention (RTI).
- The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides for multitiered systems of support (MTSS) defined broadly as “a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision making” (Title IX, Sec 8002[33]).

IDEIA allowed local education agencies to implement RTI for two purposes. First, it was intended to support all teachers in providing early literacy intervention with increasing intensity for students who demonstrate insufficient response, or progress, toward meeting grade-level expectations. Second, it allowed information about students’ response to inform the referral and identification process for students who have learning disabilities. Currently, elementary schools vary in whether they use RTI for one or both of these purposes. Since ESSA, the term *MTSS* currently encompasses a broader set of supports, including not only academic support but also social, emotional, and behavioral supports.

Although RTI and MTSS implementation varies widely across the U.S., each calls upon literacy professionals to provide intensive multitiered reading interventions within the broader domain of literacy. It is vital that teachers know how to implement the core characteristics of RTI and MTSS: high-quality literacy instruction, universal screening for difficulties, increasing intensity for tiered interventions, and frequent progress monitoring of responsiveness to intensive interventions. Implementing effective intensive intervention is urgent because data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the Nation’s Report Card, indicate that on average only about a third of U.S. fourth graders can read with proficiency on grade-level

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material. This percentage is even lower for vulnerable students who live in poverty (21%) and for students with disabilities (12%).

Tier 1 is the foundation for preventing literacy difficulties; it is intended to help most students achieve grade-level reading performance. Within Tier 1, teachers provide evidence-based literacy instruction (including reading, writing, listening, and speaking). In most schools, there are common literacy curricula that ideally support explicit teaching, but ultimately teachers use these materials to design instruction.

Schools use research-validated universal reading screening tools to identify students who are not making adequate progress in Tier 1 to receive supplemental Tier 2 interventions. These small-group interventions build students' foundational literacy skills, such as developing their ability to crack the code (phonemic awareness and phonics), their ability to spell, their word knowledge (vocabulary), their ability to use comprehension strategies, or their written expression. Depending on school resources and the number of students not making expected progress, Tier 2 may be provided by teachers or by a literacy coach or a reading/literacy specialist. Monitoring student progress frequently to modify instruction for Tier 2 or to design additional, even more explicit and systematic intensive intervention for Tier 3 to meet the needs of individual students is important.

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Tier 3 interventions are reserved for students with the most intensive needs, for students who do not show adequate progress in Tier 2. Therefore, Tier 3 should be even more intensive and be provided by literacy coaches, reading/literacy specialists, dyslexia specialists, or sometimes special education teachers. In particular, students with the most severe and persistent learning and behavioral challenges should have access to intensified interventions that include data-based individualization. In schools with additional resources, this type of intervention can also be provided in general education-supported Tier 3 intervention.

Teachers can increase the intensity for Tier 3 interventions by using flexible grouping based on needs and strengths of individual students to provide more time in intervention (e.g., length of session, number of sessions, or duration). Working with smaller groups of students (i.e., one to three) with the most intensive needs, teachers provide explicit scaffolding; frequent opportunities for student response, practice, and review; specific corrective feedback; and encouragement for motivation

and engagement. Teachers use frequent progress monitoring data (e.g., brief curriculum-based measures, informal observations of mastery or error analyses) to guide further intervention adaptations for individual students in Tier 3 and to provide information about students' literacy-specific needs and skills to guide referrals for dyslexia services and special education.

Special Education and Dyslexia

Literacy professionals may be aware that since 1975 when Public Law 94-142 was passed, the definition for “specific learning disability” (SLD) has been fairly consistent. In the literacy domain, the definition is “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to think, speak, read, write, or spell.” IDEIA (2004) specified that students with dyslexia may be found eligible within the SLD category (20 U.S.C. §1401[30]; 34 C.F.R. §300.8[c][10]). However, SLD may not be due to exclusionary criteria, including the following:

- Visual, hearing, motor, or intellectual disability
- Emotional disturbance
- Cultural factors, limited English proficiency, or economic disadvantage
- A lack of appropriate instruction

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Literacy professionals may be concerned about students who are struggling in literacy, despite having received intensive interventions. Teachers may be concerned about over- or under-identifying students given these exclusionary criteria. Teachers may not have clear directives about what constitutes adequate versus inadequate response. Therefore, even if the definition of SLD has been consistent, teachers want to stay current about changes in federal, state, and local regulations and guidance that may impact how students are identified or what services they may receive.

Prior to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEIA, most states mandated that schools use an IQ-achievement discrepancy approach to identify students with SLD. This approach came under attack for several reasons including the lack of reliability for identification and because the IQ assessments did not guide

instructional planning. So a big change in identification for SLD occurred after IDEIA because states could allow schools to use identification approaches that incorporated RTI. Currently, all 50 states support RTI or MTSS models, at least for the purpose of providing early intervening services to prevent reading difficulties, but the implementation guidelines vary.

Teachers have also experienced changes in regulations and guidance through dyslexia-related state legislation. Over the past few years, a majority of states have passed dyslexia laws or guidance emphasizing aspects consistent with RTI, such as universal screening and provision of literacy intervention that is explicit, systematic, and comprehensive. Many schools use computer adaptive tests for universal screening, and teachers collect progress monitoring data and informal information about how students respond to interventions. Teachers may participate in professional development about the science of reading and about using student literacy progress monitoring data to individualize intervention.

Given all these changes and variable implementation, knowing when and how to advocate for struggling students might be confusing for teachers. For dyslexia and SLD eligibility determinations, states and local agencies use a variety of means, and generally student study teams gather and evaluate data that include students' progress throughout the RTI/MTSS process. The study team may decide a student does not meet their criteria for SLD, but their evaluation indicates the student has a condition that makes it challenging to learn, such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. The team may decide the student qualifies for a 504 plan that provides services or accommodations to support how that student learns (e.g., using an audiobook, using assistive technology, providing additional time to complete an activity or extra time on a test).

Alternatively, the study team may determine that despite intensified intervention efforts, a student has not made sufficient progress in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading fluency, or reading comprehension. If a student meets eligibility criteria for SLD, the team would meet with the student's family to write an Individualized Education Program (IEP) with goals and objectives for specially designed instruction.

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When teachers are supporting students with IEPs, they should be aware of increased expectations that interventions enable students to make appropriate progress following the 2017 U.S. Supreme Court case *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1*. The court's decision emphasized that to be compliant with IDEIA, which requires that children receive a free and appropriate public education, schools must ensure that special education programming enables a child to make appropriate progress relative to child's circumstances. *Endrew* has increased the expectations that literacy professionals work with families to design and execute IEPs that include ambitious and challenging goals, that a process be in place to monitor progress, and that instructional changes be implemented when progress monitoring data indicate a lack of meaningful progress toward these goals.

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Conclusion

Literacy professionals have a vital role in all aspects of tiered interventions. The process of developing knowledge and self-efficacy to deliver intensive interventions can take time, particularly for novice teachers. School leaders who are supportive of this process guide data meetings, provide teachers with professional development and planning time, and also protect time for intensive intervention.

NOTE

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RESOURCES TO SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- [National Center on Intensive Intervention](#) provides resources for intensification, reviews intervention programs, and reviews the reliability of screening and progress monitoring tools.
- [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#) provides practice guides for implementing evidence-based practices through the What Works Clearinghouse. They review studies and describe the evidence and effect sizes of intervention programs and practices. See, for example, [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#) and [Assisting Students Struggling With Reading: Response to Intervention \(RtI\) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades](#). IES also offers train-the-trainer materials formatted for use by professional learning communities.
- [IRIS Center](#) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. It provides training modules on a variety of topics including reading, writing, math, behavior, English learners, and assessment. See, for example, the module on data-based individualization. Teachers can receive continuing education units for participating.

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International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2018–2019

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The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 128 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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