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# Response to Intervention

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Language related to Response to Intervention (RTI) was written into U.S. law with the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law indicates that school districts are no longer required to take into consideration whether a severe discrepancy exists between a student's achievement and his or her intellectual ability in determining eligibility for learning-disability services. Rather, they may use an alternative approach that determines first whether the student responds to "scientific, research-based" classroom instruction and, if not, then to more intensive and targeted interventions. After receiving this more tailored and intensive instruction, students who do not demonstrate adequate progress are then considered for evaluation for a specific learning disability. This approach has come to be known as RTI, although this precise term is not used in the law.

The concept of RTI builds on recommendations made by the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) that students with disabilities should first be considered general education students, embracing a model of prevention as opposed to a model of failure (National Association of State Directors of Special Education and Council of Administrators of Special Education, 2006). A prevention model intends to rectify a number of longstanding problems, including the disproportionate representation of minorities and English-language learners (ELLs) among those identified as learning disabled and the need to wait for documented failure before services are provided. The RTI provision allows local school districts that meet certain criteria to allocate up to 15% of their funding for students with disabilities toward general education interventions designed to prevent language and literacy difficulties. This explains why RTI is often perceived as a special education initiative at the same time as special education organizations describe it as a general education initiative.

The statute and regulations identify eight areas in which low achievement may be the basis for identification of a specific learning disability. Six of these areas are within the domain of language arts: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading fluency skills, and reading comprehension. For the purposes of this document, we refer to these six areas as "language and literacy." Because the areas of language and literacy can play such prominent roles in the problems of struggling learners, the International Reading Association (IRA) formed a Commission on Response to Intervention to provide its members with information and opportunities for involvement in articulating IRA's perspective on RTI. In this document, the Commission offers six key principles, adopted by IRA's Board of Directors, to guide thinking and professional work in the area of RTI. These principles are focused

specifically on RTI as it intersects with issues of language and literacy and are meant to help classroom teachers, reading/literacy specialists, speech-language pathologists, teachers of ELLs, special educators, administrators, and others as they work toward the goals of preventing language and literacy difficulties and improving instruction for all students.

The Commission embraces the concept of RTI and seeks to clarify it with regard to issues related to language and literacy. The Commission finds it productive to think of RTI as a comprehensive, systemic approach to teaching and learning designed to address language and literacy problems for *all* students through increasingly differentiated and intensified language and literacy assessment and instruction. Qualified professionals with appropriate expertise should provide this instruction. As such, RTI is a process that cuts across general, compensatory, and special education, and is not exclusively a general or special education initiative. The Commission takes the position that carefully selected assessment, dedication to differentiated instruction, quality professional development, and genuine collaboration across teachers, specialists, administrators, and parents are among the factors important for the success of RTI.

The IRA Commission also supports the idea that RTI is not a specific program or model. A paper developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2005), which includes IRA as a member, emphasizes that there is no one model or approach to RTI and many possible variations can be conceptualized. In fact, the federal government purposely provided few details for the development and implementation of RTI procedures, stating specifically that states and districts should have the flexibility to establish approaches that reflect their communities' unique situations. This means that the widely used three-tier model is neither mandated nor the only possible

approach to RTI. Similarly, the statute and regulations do not mandate screening (or any other particular) assessments per se, although they do require data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals.

Given the context for RTI, the IRA Commission feels it is extremely important that the language used in describing, developing, and implementing an RTI approach reflect its purpose as a systemic initiative rather than a specialized or particular program. More specifically, the language of RTI should reflect the emphasis on optimizing instruction for students who are struggling with language and literacy rather than assuming permanent learning deficits. This may be especially important for English learners or youth living in poverty. For many ELLs, second-language acquisition and development are more uneven than for monolingual English students. For example, some linguistically diverse students with good vocabulary knowledge might still have difficulty with grammar. In order to inform instruction and intervention efforts, we need to avoid characterizing students' profiles in broad terms, such as "low language skills" or "low literacy ability," and instead generate an understanding of students' skills—their strengths and their weaknesses—in specific domains of language and literacy.

To summarize, RTI is not a model to be imposed on schools, but rather a framework to help schools identify and support students before the difficulties they encounter with language and literacy become more serious. According to the research, relatively few students who are having difficulty in language and literacy have specific learning disabilities. Many other factors, including the nature of educational opportunities provided, affect students' academic and social growth. For example, teaching practices and assessment tools that are insensitive to cultural and linguistic differences can lead to ineffective instruction or misjudgments in evaluation. In this document, we assume that instruction and intervention can and will be effective for large numbers of students who are experiencing literacy or other academic difficulties. It is our responsibility to identify students' needs and help students succeed.

Students are often identified as "struggling" or "learning disabled" based on their growth and development in language and literacy. Consequently, IRA takes its responsibility as a professional organization seriously and suggests that its members be active participants in all aspects of RTI in their schools, districts, and states.

To further clarify issues related to RTI with respect to language and literacy, the Commission offers the following set of principles as a guide to IRA members and others concerned with developing and implementing an RTI approach to improving the language and literacy learning of all students.

## Guiding Principles

### 1. Instruction

RTI is first and foremost intended to prevent problems by optimizing language and literacy instruction.

- Whatever approach is taken to RTI, it should ensure optimal instruction for every student at all levels of schooling. It should prevent serious language and literacy problems through increasingly differentiated and intensified assessment and instruction and reduce the disproportionate number of minority youth and ELLs identified as learning disabled.
- Instruction and assessment conducted by the classroom teacher are central to the success of RTI and must address the needs of all students, including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Evidence shows that effective classroom instruction can reduce substantially the number of students who are inappropriately classified as learning disabled.
- A successful RTI process begins with the highest quality core instruction in the classroom—that is, instruction that encompasses all areas of language and literacy as part of a coherent curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for preK–12 students and does not underestimate their potential for learning. This core instruction may or may not involve commercial programs, and it must in all cases be provided by an informed, competent classroom teacher.
- The success of RTI depends on the classroom teacher’s use of research-based practices. As defined by IRA (2002), *research based* means “that a particular program or collection of instructional practices has a record of success. That is, there is reliable, trustworthy, and valid evidence to suggest that when the program is used with a particular group of children, the children can be expected to make adequate gains in reading achievement.”
- Research on instructional practices must provide not only information about what works, but also what works with whom, by whom, in what contexts, and on which outcomes. The effectiveness of a particular practice needs to have been demonstrated with the types of students who will receive the instruction, taking into account, for example, whether the students live in rural or urban settings or come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Research evidence frequently represents the effectiveness of an instructional practice on average, which suggests that some students benefited and others did not. This means that

instruction must be provided by a teacher who understands the intent of the research-based practice being used and has the professional expertise and responsibility to plan instruction and adapt programs and materials as needed (see also principle 6, Expertise).

- When core language and literacy instruction is not effective for a particular student, it should be modified to address more closely the needs and abilities of that student. Classroom teachers, at times in collaboration with other experts, must exercise their best professional judgment in providing responsive teaching and differentiation (see also principle 2).

### 2. Responsive Teaching and Differentiation

The RTI process emphasizes increasingly differentiated and intensified instruction or intervention in language and literacy.

- RTI is centrally about optimizing language and literacy instruction for particular students. This means that differentiated instruction, based on instructionally relevant assessment, is essential. Evidence shows that small-group and individualized instruction are effective in reducing the number of students who are at risk of becoming classified as learning disabled.
- Instruction and materials selection must derive from specific student–teacher interactions and not be constrained by packaged programs. Students have different language and literacy needs, so they may not respond similarly to instruction—even when research-based practices are used. No single approach to instruction or intervention can address the broad and varied goals and needs of all students, especially those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- The boundaries between differentiation and intervention are permeable and not clear-cut. Instruction or intervention must be flexible enough to respond to evidence from student performance and teaching interactions. It should not be constrained by institutional procedures that emphasize uniformity.

### 3. Assessment

An RTI approach demands assessment that can inform language and literacy instruction meaningfully.

- Assessment should reflect the multidimensional nature of language and literacy learning and the diversity among students being assessed. The utility of an assessment is dependent on the extent to which it provides valid information on the essential aspects of language and literacy that can be used to plan appropriate instruction.

- Assessments, tools, and techniques should provide useful and timely information about desired language and literacy goals. They should reflect authentic language and literacy activities as opposed to contrived texts or tasks generated specifically for assessment purposes. The quality of assessment information should not be sacrificed for the efficiency of an assessment procedure.
- Multiple purposes for assessment should be clearly identified and appropriate tools and techniques employed. Not all available tools and techniques are appropriate for all purposes, and different assessments—even in the same language or literacy domain—capture different skills and knowledge. Particular care should be taken in selecting assessments for ELLs and for students who speak an English dialect that differs from mainstream dialects.
- Efficient assessment systems involve a layered approach in which screening techniques are used both to identify which students require further (diagnostic) assessment and to provide aggregate data about the nature of student achievement overall. Initial (screening) assessments should not be used as the sole mechanism for determining the appropriateness of targeted interventions. Ongoing progress monitoring must include an evaluation of the instruction itself and requires observation of the student in the classroom.
- Classroom teachers and reading/literacy specialists should play a central role in conducting language and literacy assessments and in using assessment results to plan instruction and monitor student performance.
- Assessment as a component of RTI should be consistent with the *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* developed jointly by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (2010).

### 4. Collaboration

RTI requires a dynamic, positive, and productive collaboration among professionals with relevant expertise in language and literacy. Success also depends on strong and respectful partnerships among professionals, parents, and students.

- Collaboration should be focused on the available evidence about the needs of students struggling in language and literacy. School-level decision-making teams (e.g., intervention teams, problem-solving teams, RTI teams) should include members with relevant expertise in language and literacy, including second-language learning.

- Reading/literacy specialists and coaches should provide leadership in every aspect of an RTI process—planning, assessment, provision of more intensified instruction and support, and making decisions about next steps. These individuals must embody the knowledge, skills, and dispositions detailed for reading specialists in IRA's (2003) *Standards for Reading Professionals* (and the accompanying revised role definitions from August 2007).
- Collaboration should increase, not reduce, the coherence of the instruction experienced by struggling readers. There must be congruence between core language and literacy instruction and interventions. This requires a shared vision and common goals for language and literacy instruction and assessment, adequate time for communication and coordinated planning among general education and specialist teachers, and integrated professional development.
- Involving parents and students and engaging them in a collaborative manner is critical to successful implementation. Initiating and strengthening collaborations among school, home, and communities, particularly in urban and rural areas, provides the basis for support and reinforcement of students' learning.

## 5. Systemic and Comprehensive Approaches

RTI must be part of a comprehensive, systemic approach to language and literacy assessment and instruction that supports all preK–12 students and teachers.

- RTI needs to be integrated within the context of a coherent and consistent language and literacy curriculum that guides comprehensive instruction for all students. Core instruction—indeed, all instruction—must be continuously improved to increase its efficacy and mitigate the need for specialized interventions.

- Specific approaches to RTI need to be appropriate for the particular school or district culture and take into account leadership, expertise, the diversity of the student population, and the available resources. Schools and districts should adopt an approach that best matches their needs and resources while still accomplishing the overall goals of RTI.
- A systemic approach to language and literacy learning within an RTI framework requires the active participation and genuine collaboration of many professionals, including classroom teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, special educators, and school psychologists. Given the critical role that language development plays in literacy learning, professionals with specialized language-related expertise such as speech-language pathologists and teachers of ELLs may be particularly helpful in addressing students' language difficulties.
- Approaches to RTI must be sensitive to developmental differences in language and literacy among students at different ages and grades. Although many prevailing approaches to RTI focus on the early elementary grades, it is essential for teachers and support personnel at middle and secondary levels to provide their students with the language and literacy instruction they need to succeed in school and beyond.
- Administrators must ensure adequate resources and appropriate scheduling to allow all professionals to collaborate.
- Ongoing and job-embedded professional development is necessary for all educators involved in the RTI process. Professional development should be context specific and provided by professional developers with appropriate preparation and skill to support school and district personnel. Professional expertise is essential to improving students' language and literacy learning in general as well as within the context of RTI (see also principle 6).

## 6. Expertise

All students have the right to receive instruction from well-prepared teachers who keep up to date and supplemental instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach language and literacy (IRA, 2000).

- Teacher expertise is central to instructional improvement, particularly for students who encounter difficulty in acquiring language and literacy. RTI may involve a range of professionals; however, the greater the literacy difficulty, the greater the need for expertise in literacy teaching and learning.
- Important dimensions of teachers' expertise include their knowledge and understanding of language and literacy development, their ability to use powerful assessment tools and techniques, and their ability to translate information about student performance into instructionally relevant instructional techniques.
- The exemplary core instruction that is so essential to the success of RTI is dependent on highly knowledgeable and skilled classroom teachers (IRA, 2003).
- Professionals who provide supplemental instruction or intervention must have a high level of expertise in all aspects of language and literacy instruction and assessment and be capable of intensifying or accelerating language and literacy learning.
- Success for culturally and linguistically diverse students depends on teachers and support personnel who are well prepared to teach in a variety of settings. Deep knowledge of cultural and linguistic differences is especially critical for the prevention of language and literacy problems in diverse student populations.
- Expertise in the areas of language and literacy requires a comprehensive approach to professional preparation that involves preservice, induction, and inservice education. It also requires opportunities for extended practice under the guidance of knowledgeable and experienced mentors.

## Resources and References

In addition to the citations included in this text (references and Web links for which appear below), IRA offers a range of resources to support its members and other professionals in their work with all learners. See, particularly, the IRA website area on "Resources by Topic" ([www.reading.org/Resources/ResourcesByTopic.aspx](http://www.reading.org/Resources/ResourcesByTopic.aspx)), where RTI is one of the highlighted areas. See also IRA position statements on critical issues in the field, at [www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements.aspx).

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Adopted by the IRA Board of Directors  
October 2009

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