

Response to Intervention: A Special Education Perspective

by Richard O'Neill, MA

The language of Response to Intervention (RtI) has finally found its way from the theoretical to the practical. The 2004 revision of IDEA opened the door by including language that allows Local Educational Agencies to use a method other than the discrepancy model, and to consider a child's response to interventions, as part of the Learning Disability (LD) determination. In Texas, the Commissioner's rules allow for the determination of LD eligibility if a student does not make sufficient progress when provided scientific, research-based intervention. Additionally, the Commissioner's Rules require LEAs to provide a variety of interventions, including RtI, prior to the referral for an initial evaluation. It is evident that both federal and state laws require schools to include the RtI model in both their pre-referral and evaluation processes.

The RtI model is refreshingly simple at first glance as there are only two components: the Intervention and the Response. As is often the case, "the devil is in the details". There continue to be questions about what constitutes appropriate interventions and responses.

The law commonly referred to as "No Child Left Behind" provides a definition of the term "scientific, researched-based intervention", and Texas law makes reference to the same federal definition. That definition is very precise, and so limiting that few common interventions qualify. As a practical matter, there are many time-tested interventions (such as one-on-one tutoring) that are generally regarded as effective. When in doubt, educators should consider whether the specific intervention could be reasonably expected to improve a specific academic skill (such as reading, writing, or math). For example, moving a student to the front of the classroom can not reasonably be expected to improve math skills, but reviewing multiplication facts during a tutoring session can. The former would not be considered an "intervention" within the context of RtI, but the latter would.

To measure a response to any intervention, there must be at least two assessments (pre- and post- intervention) and then a comparison of the two scores to measure improvement. In Texas, the Commissioner's Rules specify, "data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals". If the intervention being used is a purchased program, then the program will include assessments with instructions for the frequency of assessment and degree of expected improvement. If the intervention is more commonplace, the assessment of progress may include the results of standard assessments in addition to teacher documentation (such as test grades).

From the perspective of Special Education in Texas, the screening process (mandated by the Commissioner's Rules) must include a review of the nature, duration, and efficacy of interventions, as well as the student's responses to those interventions, before generating a referral for a Full and Individual Evaluation (FIE). The members of the screening committee share in the responsibility of ensuring the integrity of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process.