Thesis

A Response to Intervention (RTI) model enables educators to individualize the strict curriculum standards set forth by the State legislature in order to assist at risk students in achieving their academic goals without first determining that the students have a learning disability.

The Nuts and Bolts of the Response to Intervention Model

Response to Intervention is more prevalent within school districts throughout the United States now than it has ever been. In fact, a study from 2009 determined more than 70% of school districts nationwide have implemented some sort of RTI.[1] This paper will set forth an RTI model for secondary education and detail its pros and cons. To start, an RTI model will encompass many different goals at both the student level and the administrative level. However, there are two main goals for an effective RTI model as enumerated by Douglas and Lynn Fuchs. First, an effective RTI model seeks to promptly identify at-risk students "so that students participate in prevention prior to the onset of severe deficits, which can be difficult to remediate."[2] Second, an effective RTI model will enable educators "to identify students with [learning disabilities] who prove unresponsive" to the interventions early on and refer those students for special education.[3] These two goals attempt to identify the 20% of students who are in need of some intervention outside of the general education classroom before those students fall too far behind academically.[4]

There is no standard RTI model that is used uniformly by school districts across the United States. However, many school districts are beginning to implement the RTI framework

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[1] (Spectrum K12, 2009)
[2] (Fuchs & Fuchs, May/June 2007)
[3] Ibid.
[4] (Vujnovic, Holdaway, Owens, & Fabiano, 2013)

for both academic and behavioral purposes. This is partly due to the fact that Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and now allows schools to utilize RTI in order to identify those students with specific learning disabilities (SLD).[5]

The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) provides the following definition of RTI:

> Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.[6]

As mentioned, an RTI model encompasses multiple tiers with differing intensity levels of intervention. It is true that RTI is more effective at the elementary level because the intervention occurs early enough to prevent students from falling behind in subjects like math and reading where the RTI framework is commonly utilized. However, I believe that the RTI framework set forth below at the secondary level will accomplish RTI's main goals and enable at-risk high school students to achieve their high school's curriculum standards.

Douglas and Lynn Fuchs set forth six components that need to be considered before a school district can begin implementing RTI.[7] These six components include: (1) "how many tiers of intervention to use," (2) "how to target students for preventative intervention," (3) "the nature of that preventative intervention," (4) "how to classify response," (5) "the nature of the multidisciplinary evaluation prior to special education," and (6) "the function and design of

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[5] (U.S. Department of Education, 2007)
[6] (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010)
[7] (Fuchs & Fuchs, May/June 2007)

special education." [8]   I will focus on the first three components above. Furthermore, for the purposes of this paper, I am going to construct an RTI model after the framework used by a suburban high school district ("model district") located west of Chicago, Illinois in the subject of reading.

The most common RTI framework encompasses a three tier system. The model district utilizes a three tier system. Tier I is the lowest tier and "represents the general education curriculum or classroom management."[9] The important component of Tier I, sometimes referred to as primary intervention, is that it is usually provided by the general education teachers to every student within the classroom.[10] Some of the many examples of Tier I intervention include providing the students with fill in the blank worksheets after each unit, writing homework assignments and due dates on the chalk/white board, providing checklists for larger, semester long projects, and handing out weekly or monthly syllabi. Studies have shown that 80% of students "are able to be successful with Tier I instruction alone."[11] For the remaining 20% that fails to respond to Tier I intervention, Tier II intervention is needed.

Tier II, sometimes referred to as secondary prevention, utilizes "targeted or strategic interventions" outside of the general education classroom over several weeks that provides students with the opportunity to grasp the material in a slower paced environment.[12] The model district provides Tier II, semester long reading courses that meet two to three times a week for those students who did not respond to the Tier I intervention. I will discuss the details regarding the nature of the intervention within these classes below. If the student does not respond to the Tier II intervention, the student will move to Tier III intervention.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] (Vujnovic, Holdaway, Owens, & Fabiano, 2013)
[10] (Fuchs & Fuchs, May/June 2007)
[11] (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010, p. 4)
[12] (Rathvon, 2008, p. 7)

Tier III intervention employs daily, intensive "programming and progress monitoring" that is tailored towards the individual student.[13] Since the RTI model is being used at a high school, most students within Tier III at the model district are already provided special education services. If a student is moved into the Tier III reading class, the move is not automatically accompanied by a referral for special education services. These students are placed in semester long courses that have very high teacher-student ratios. The Tier III reading teachers and aides closely monitor the student's response to Tier III intervention for a duration of 6 to 8 weeks. During this time, the student and teacher will individualize the reading curriculum and determine the best course of action that enables the student to achieve their reading goals. However, it is imperative, especially at the high school level where LD have gone uncovered for many years, that the educators carefully document the student's response and make the appropriate referral for special education services if the Tier III intervention seems futile.

After determining the amount of tiers within the RTI framework, a school district must implement a way to identify the 20% of students that will need more than Tier I intervention. Upon entering high school, each freshman within the model district takes a universal assessment that measures their reading ability. Each student that falls below a certain percentile is placed into either the Tier II or Tier III reading classes. Many of the students who place into Tier III reading will already have an IEP going into high school. During the students first year in high school, all of the freshmen take the reading assessment at the end of both their first and second semesters. This allows for extensive data retrieval to determine how well the students are responding to all three tiers of intervention. Those students that excelled within the Tier II classes and showed improvement will not have to enroll in the reading courses in the following semester. Similarly, those students that showed sufficient improvement within the Tier III

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[13] (Fuchs & Fuchs, May/June 2007, p. 15)

classes are given the opportunity to move up into the faster paced and less intensive Tier II courses. Conversely, those students that failed to respond to Tier I intervention in the general education classrooms will be enrolled in the Tier II classes in an attempt to prevent any further deterioration in their academics. Similarly, those students that did not positively respond to Tier II intervention will be enrolled in Tier III courses for the following semester.

The third and final component that is relevant for this paper pertains to the type of preventative intervention that is implemented by the school district. The two most researched types of preventative intervention are problem solving and standard protocols.[14] Problem solving provides a "personalize[d] assessment and intervention" plan for each student.[15] On the other hand, standard protocol is not individualized for each student. Instead, "implementation usually involves a trial of fixed duration delivered in small groups or individually."[16] Both of these implementation methods have their pros and cons. Therefore, a hybrid model is used by the model district in an attempt to tailor the RTI to the needs of the student while allowing for group intervention when it is feasible. More specifically, in the Tier II classrooms, the students are taught at a moderate pace in groups of 6 to 10 students using the standard protocol method. Each Tier II class has at least one aid in addition to the teacher to enable one on one interaction when necessary. In the Tier III classrooms, the students are taught in very small class sizes of 3 to 6 and each student has either an IEP or a specific set of goals that structures the type of intervention each student will receive, which is how the problem solving method is used. In order to determine the students' response to the types of intervention used in both Tiers II and III, each student is assessed twice a semester, as opposed to once. This allows the educators to

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[14] (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, pp. 94-95)
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

determine whether the student is responding to the interventions, whether the type of intervention needs to be adjusted to better suit the students' needs, or if special education services are needed.

In order for this RTI framework to be successful, educators need to properly document the types of intervention taken at each tier as well as the students' response. Even though each student is assessed twice during their first year in high school, the teachers need to document each student's progress throughout the semester. When a student is unresponsive to both Tier I and II, special education services may become an option. Therefore, "clear documentation of data reflecting lack of progress and low proficiency levels achieved in Tiers 1 and 2 provides a solid foundation for recommending a comprehensive special education evaluation."[17]

In summation, the model district has implemented a three tier RTI framework that assesses all students entering the 9th grade. This assessment allows students to be placed in one of the three tiers of intervention before they enter the school year based on their reading level. During the school year, each student is assessed at least twice to determine if the students are responding to the specific interventions. Each student is provided an intervention that is suited towards their needs within the Tier II and III courses. The student's response to the intervention determines whether special education is indeed the necessary course of action to enable the student to achieve the curriculum standards.

Response to Intervention and its Effects on Students and Schools

The 21st century classroom is more diverse than ever before. Students have different family backgrounds, different wealth statuses, and different races to name a few. In my mind, the largest difference between each student is their learning abilities. However, more and more State legislatures are setting forth strict curriculum standards that are not adapted to each

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[17] (Hoover & Love, Jan/Feb 2011)

student's learning ability. RTI models, like the one set forth above, seek to individualize the curriculum for each and every student who may be at-risk of falling behind academically.

The RTI framework is an efficient and inexpensive method of individualizing the curriculum in order to ensure that the students achieve their personal goals as well as those goals set forth by the district. The RTI framework has been gaining popularity within many school districts because studies have shown, and Congress has agreed, that the IQ-achievement discrepancy standard is outdated and does not accurately identify those students with SLDs.[18] However, there are opposing views that believe RTI deprives students with SLDs from getting the special education services they need and have a right to receive.[19] Furthermore, I talked to a former elementary education teacher, and current secondary special education teacher, about RTI and she told me that school districts need to streamline the RTI process in order to ensure that students with SLDs get the services they deserve.

There is a delicate balance between RTI and SLD determinations. I agree with the opponents in the sense that RTI should not and cannot be a barrier to special education services. It is up to the teachers who work with students on a daily basis to document and assess each student's abilities and progress. If RTI would be futile, then a referral for special education services should be made. However, I do not agree that RTI is fatally flawed. RTI provides at-risk students an opportunity to overcome their academic deficiencies. Singling out each at-risk student and referring them for special education services is not only costly, it also fails to actually help address the student's problems. RTI models, especially at Tiers II and III, seek to find an efficient intervention strategy that will enable the student to catch-up with his/her peers.

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[18] (U.S. Department of Education, 2007)
[19] (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009)

If there is no response, the teacher promptly determines, after looking at the compiled data, that the student in fact needs special education services.

From a student perspective, RTI enables students to continue learning in general education classrooms, but also allows for additional help in certain subjects when needed. From second grade on, I suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder. Thankfully, modern medicine enabled me to remain in general education classes and eventually graduate with honors. Looking back on high school, I always struggled with reading comprehension. RTI was not implemented at my high school, but I believe that I would have benefited from some sort of intervention in order to overcome this deficiency sooner. There are many students who, like me, need a little extra time grasping certain topics, especially in math and reading. Would those students benefit from special education services? Probably, but maybe not. RTI provides that extra assistance to these students while saving money and enabling students to achieve their potential without automatic referral for special education services every time a student falls behind academically.

The model district's RTI framework is an efficient alternative to the IQ-achievement discrepancy standard for many reasons. RTI and its compiled data allows for educators, psychologists and parents to make a conscious, data based decision on whether a student needs to be referred for special education services. The IQ-achievement discrepancy standard is flawed because each school district is different when determining whether a student has a severe discrepancy that warrants special education services. RTI and its framework will differ from state to state, but the best interests of each at-risk student will be the focus on whether to continue intervention or refer the student for special education services. RTI enables educators to promptly intervene when they see a student start to fall behind and implement preventative measures to ensure the student does not continue to fall behind; thus allowing the student to

catch up to his peers. Overall, the RTI framework allows for the educators to determine whether a student's deficiencies are better served by increased intervention or by special education services.

While opponents claim that the cost of implementing RTI models is too high, the benefit each student receives clearly outweighs that cost. The RTI model detailed above requires that high trained aides and reading educators with master's degrees be hired in order to successfully implement Tiers II and III. The students will benefit from these highly trained educators because it allows for higher student teacher ratios during key intervention levels. These educators will also be equipped with the type of knowledge and expertise to promptly implement interventions, or determine that the interventions will be futile and refer the student for special education services. In addition to the beneficial nature of Tiers II and III, every student benefits from primary intervention that is given within the general education classrooms because Tier I reinforces deadlines, reviews each unit when it concludes, and creates checklists for larger projects. In addition, studies have shown that "it costs two to three times more to teach children with disabilities."[20] As long as the school districts motive for using RTI is not to delay or eliminate providing special education services, then RTI is a money saving framework. The money saved allows school districts to hire highly trained individuals to properly implement RTI and maximize the educational benefit each student receives.

Another barrier to RTI pertains to teacher level implementation. Each general education teacher will have additional responsibilities to ensure that the integrity of the RTI framework is being applied the same way over the course of the school year. In fact, one of the major challenges when implementing RTI is "obtaining teacher support for and 'buy-in' to accept

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[20] (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006)

necessary changes associated with the transition to this instructional framework."[21] It is imperative that the whole school buys into the RTI framework in order for it to work and for the students to benefit. In order to move beyond this barrier, each school district and its administrators need to come up with an RTI framework and communicate that framework to the educators, psychologists, aides and parents. Communication is vital for the RTI model above to be successful, especially at the secondary level where a student will likely have different teachers for each subject. Therefore, each teacher needs to communicate and be willing to adjust the type of intervention to meet the needs of the students.

Conclusion

Overall, RTI seeks to provide a benefit to each and every student by providing three levels of intervention that allow for personalization of the curriculum, which enables each student to meet the demanding academic standards set forth by the State legislature. RTI should not be used as an alternative to special education services and should not be used to delay referrals for special education services. When implemented correctly, RTI gives struggling students a chance to reach their academic potential by encouraging them to overcome academic deficits without rushing to determine whether the student has a SLD.

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[21] (Hoover & Love, Jan/Feb 2011)

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