

The Devil Is in the Details

The Logistics of Tier 2 Intervention

BY JOANNE ALLAIN & STEVAN J. KUKIC

Yogi Berra once said, "In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice; in practice, there is." In the theoretical structure of RTI, there are three tiers of intervention: Tier 1 occurs in the general education classroom and focuses on differentiation of instruction using the strategies included in the effective schools literature (Cotton, 1999); Tier 2 interventions are strategic and based on a diagnostic assessment of the progress and needs of some students who need targeted, short-term assistance; and Tier 3 interventions are intensive and provide comprehensive, long-term solutions for the few students who require systematic, well-sequenced alternative curricula in order to succeed. Perfectly sequenced tiers of intervention for all, some, and few students might sound elegant, but the reality of school requires flexibility in student placement and intervention selection.

The RTI model will not work without a substantial foundation, including efficient instruction and a balance between commitment to content and sensitivity to student achievement differences, at Tier 1. Students will fail and drop out if Tier 3 is not focused on the best available intensive interventions. In all tiers, schools must commit to using proven practice, delivered by experts in differentiating instruction, in structures that are governed by student progress monitoring and data-based decision making.

IMPLEMENTING TIER 2

The tier with the greatest flexibility is Tier 2. Tier 2 interventions can provide the sort of short-term assistance that could turn a struggling student around. The flexibility of being able to provide diagnostically determined strategies at just the right time can have significant effects on student success. Although Tier 2 interventions are a great idea, the devil is in the details.

Tier 2 literacy intervention presents many logistical challenges that require attention if we hope to meet the needs of our students and develop a working RTI system. In addition to instructional practice, the daily mechanics of the system can determine whether RTI will become the foundation of an educational program or one more failed reform (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Fixen, Naom, Blasé, Friedman & Wallace, 2005). However, before addressing the management of Tier 2, we must first discuss Tier 1 instruction relative to student achievement levels. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE; Batsche, et al., 2007) asserts that an optimum RTI configuration reflects that approximately 80% of students are performing at Tier 1 (benchmark and advanced), 15% of students will require Tier 2 (strategic) intervention, and 5% of students will need more intense intervention in Tier 3. However, many school populations do not presently fit this model. What happens if a school has a preponderance of students who seemingly require Tier 2 intervention even though the school employs what they believe is a scientifically based Tier 1 curriculum?

Determining a school's current RTI configuration informs all tiers of instruction, and it specifically affects Tier 2 instruction. For example, if the majority of students in a school are in need of Tier 2 intervention, it is logical to first analyze instruction and intervention in Tier 1 and make the changes needed to ensure the success of most students. This can be accomplished by revamping Tier 1 to include research- and evidence-based instruction, more time, explicit instruction on targeted skills, more practice items, and adjusted pacing. Moats (2007, p. 13) states: "Each (publisher) claims that its approaches and materials square with SBRR (scientifically based reading research), but this is a ruse. And no small number of schools and districts are being fooled." Adjusting Tier 1 to include more explicit and intensive instruction will likely result in fewer students referred for additional intervention (Greenwood, Kamps, Terry, & Linebarger, 2007). In effect, Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction meld until most students are performing at the levels suggested by NASDSE.

LOGISTICS

Logistically, the first step in implementing Tier 2 is to create an organizational structure in which any model of RTI can flourish. To begin the discussion, let us assume that

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Tier 1 instruction consists of a minimum of 90 minutes to 2 hours and employs a research- and evidence-based curriculum that contains enough explicit and intense instruction to reach the majority of students. There also must be a problem-solving model that includes universal screening and progress monitoring in order to identify students who are in need of additional time and intensity. This is where Tier 2 instruction comes in. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) recommend 45 minutes per day for 4 days per week in small groups for Tier 2 instruction. However, 45 minutes of actual instruction often translates into 60 minutes of class time to allow for housekeeping, homework review, and interruptions. Recognizing the realities of classroom instruction and management can help to organize a system that supports the implementation of RTI. Most RTI models involve 30 minutes each day of Tier 2 intervention in addition to the 90 to 120 minutes of core reading instruction (Burns, Hall-Lande, Lyman, Rogers, & Tan, 2006).

Scheduling and class configuration provide the basis for a manageable structure and often present the most significant challenges for Tier 2 intervention. A concern about Tier 2 instruction is that time will be taken from other educational activity. The goal is to make the schedule flexible enough to meet the needs of staff and students while maintaining a degree of structure familiar enough to relieve the anxiety of the stakeholders. Consider the following three options as possible starting points for the implementation of Tier 2 intervention. Option One provides heterogeneous grouping for students for Tier 1

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instruction with added differentiation time immediately following the Tier 1 class, during which students move to homogeneous groups for targeted instruction. Option Two requires homogeneous grouping for all Tier 1 classes with instruction differentiated during Tier 1 instruction and includes added time for further differentiation. Option Three provides heterogeneous groups for Tier 1 instruction with Tier 2 instruction occurring at a different time of the day. All three options rely on parallel scheduling (i.e., scheduling at the same time of the day as much as possible, permitting the movement of students among tiers without disrupting other educational activities) to allow for the lateral movement of students among classes. All three options are explained in more detail below.

Option One. Reading/Language Arts classes are parallel scheduled. Tier 1 reading instruction includes an extended amount of time for targeted intervention. Students in Tiers 1 and 2 receive the same amount of time for Reading/Language Arts. At the end of the Tier 1 instruction, students then "walk to read" and literally move to designated classrooms that provide instruction based on student need. In this model, students are heterogeneously grouped for Tier 1 instruction, and during differentiation, students are homogeneously grouped with reduced class/group size for Tier 2 intervention. In Tier 1, students receive enrichment and reinforcement while in Tier 2, students receive specific skill instruction in small groups based on assessed student needs.

General education teachers, instructional aides, Title I teachers, special education teachers, reading coaches, and other available trained personnel join the Tier 2 classes to assist with small group instruction. It is important to note that small group instruction means one teacher or instructor with one small group for the duration of the Tier 2 intervention. It does not mean one teacher managing several small groups at a time without assistance. Students requiring Tier 2 interventions need more, not less instructional time. In situations where additional personnel are not able or available to help with instruction, Tier 2 classes are then configured to be as small as possible and students receive instruction carefully designed to meet their assessed needs. All students return to heterogeneously grouped classes after targeted intervention.

Option Two. Additional time is built into the Reading/Language Arts block and classes are parallel scheduled as much as possible. All students are homogeneously grouped for Reading/Language Arts instruction based on their placement within the tiers. Instruction is specifically designed to meet the needs of the students enrolled. Reading/Language Arts classes that deliver Tier 2 instruction may progress at a different pace, employ more intense instruction, and provide more opportunity for practice while Tier 1 classes use the additional time to reinforce and enrich. At the completion of the Reading/Language Arts block, students return to heterogeneously grouped classes for the remainder of the day.

Option Three. A third option provides heterogeneously grouped classes for Tier 1



without added differentiation time. At a designated time during the school day, all students receive additional literacy support. Literacy support classes are parallel scheduled to allow for flexible grouping. Parallel scheduling literacy support classes frees personnel from other instructional responsibilities so that they are available to teach these classes. Again, students participating in Tier 2 intervention receive targeted skill instruction while students in Tier 1 receive enrichment and reinforcement. A question may arise about the necessity of providing additional support or enrichment for students already performing at proficient or advanced levels. Literacy is the foundation for achievement throughout the educational process. It is just as important to work to secure and/or advance the literacy levels of students performing at or above grade level as to target the needs of students who struggle.

Once the structure and time are determined, the next decision is how and when children will enter and exit Tier 2 instruction. Developing a common instructional schedule allows schools to employ one or both of the following models of exit and entry for Tier 2. O'Connor (2007) suggests that Tier 2 intervention can be managed in two ways, either by duration, in which the intervention lasts 10 to 15 weeks, or by student progress during the intervention.

The first model relies on providing instruction for a specific amount of time in Tier 2 before determining whether students have met their target goals, are making progress but should be enrolled in another round of Tier 2, or are not making progress and should be referred to Tier 3. In attempting to determine the optimum dosage of Tier 2 intervention in second grade, Vaughn (as cited in O'Connor, 2007) found that 31% of students caught up to average reading levels within 10 weeks, 53% caught up in 20 weeks, and 76% of students achieved average reading levels in 30 weeks. If considering a standard duration of instruction, schools can adjust treatment in Tier 2 to coincide with school schedules. For example, schools that employ a trimester system might elect to review student progress at the end of each term to determine exit and entry of students. Of course, student progress is continually monitored during the instructional process. If this model is applied, articulated entry and exit criteria and procedures are essential to accommodate students who achieve higher levels at faster rates in Tier 2, or those in Tier 1 who exhibit a need for additional intervention and may be ready to enter or exit Tier 2 prior to the end of the standard term. For example, if a student requires referral to or exit from intervention before the standard duration of treatment, a specific procedure is followed in which the teacher collects the data described in the entry or exit criteria and presents it to the grade level team for further evaluation and possible change in placement. Making change manageable does not mean that we neglect the needs of the students.

The second decision-making model calls for the referral of students as soon as they exhibit difficulty in Tier 1. Students then receive Tier 2 instruction that is discontinued when they demonstrate sufficient progress. This data-responsive approach to Tier 2 necessitates the continual movement of students in and out of Tier 2 instruction as well as Tier 2 classes that can be created and dismantled as needed. We want to address the needs of students as soon as possible, but we also need to avoid a yo-yo effect in which students bounce back and forth between Tier 1 instruction and Tier 1 plus Tier 2 instruction. Therefore, if employing this model, it is imperative to articulate specific exit and entry procedures that include various data points as well as a suitable and realistic schedule for team meetings to determine student placement. In such a system, daily meetings might seem advisable but are they practical and sustainable?

Both models have the potential to be effective if carefully planned and executed. However, choosing the ideal configuration for a school initiating RTI depends not only on student need but also on the readiness and training of the administrative and instructional staff, physical space, budget constraints, numbers of students, and the availability and capacity of support personnel to assist with Tier 2 instruction. At the elementary level, a school may choose to employ both models, with K-3 using a fluid form of referral and grades 4-5 employing a standard duration of treatment. It bears repeating that if RTI is viewed as an evolving process, we can alter the construct as student progress is analyzed and/or the school situation changes.

The Context of the Logistics. To make the most impact, interventions must be delivered in a context that is intervention friendly, collaborative, and data driven. As an example of this context, the Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) model (Sopris West Educational Services, 2005) depicts the systems change needed by our schools to empower all, some, and few students to achieve to high levels (see Figure 1).

The four components of system change are assessment, curriculum, instruction, and positive behavior supports. These components must work together with coherence and synergy, while being nurtured and supported. From this model's perspective, the first line of support is the development and maintenance of an empowering culture, a culture of collaboration and problem solving. Professional development is the next nurturing influence. Only with a comprehensive system of professional development can the district/school ensure intervention fidelity and success. Nurturing all of the above-mentioned components is, of course, strong and strategically focused leadership.

RTI AS A CHANGE PROCESS

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) describe the notion of first- and second-order change. A first-order change requires little change in behavior and philosophy, as is the case when new instructional materials are adopted but instructional methods remain constant. Second-order change is defined as "a dramatic departure from the



Figure 1
The Closing the Achievement Gap Model



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expected, both in defining a given problem and finding a solution” (p. 66). Tier 2 intervention requires a diagnostic and fluid instructional model that is relatively new to general education, which suggests that developing an effective Tier 2 model is a second-order change. Both administrators and teachers experience a vertical learning curve when initiating tiered instruction.

While educators grapple to understand and provide a fluid model of instruction and intervention based on assessed student need, we must make the initial change manageable so that all stakeholders can build the capacity necessary to implement and sustain RTI. Consider creating a

data-driven RTI process that will evolve as teacher and administrator knowledge increases, rather than making initial decisions that are written in stone and ultimately become obsolete. A successful model fits the unique composition of the school and community, and attends to the changing needs of the students and staff.

The first year of any innovation can be considered year zero. It is a time when validated versions of RTI are enacted and evaluated to determine the most appropriate model for each school and grade within that school. Because implementation integrity is critical to RTI (Gansle & Noell, 2007), the first years of an RTI initiative are an opportunity to develop manageable implementation plans that can be embraced and executed with integrity based on the capacity of the staff and needs of the students. It is important to first implement any evidence-based practice with fidelity before making alterations (Fixen, et al., 2005). The Dissemination Working Group (1999) contends that striving for fidelity of program and organization is essential so that if changes or innovations occur in the future we can be sure that they are necessary and not an effort to avoid accountability for the current practice being implemented (p. 17). Thus, “changes in skill levels, organizational capacity, organizational culture, and so on require education, practice, and time to mature” (Fixen et al., 2005, p. 16). As knowledge, practice, and expertise are developed, levels of sophistication are added that ultimately result in a seamless model of instruction and intervention. This is not to recommend that schools drag their feet but rather that they recognize the status of the administrative and instructional staff and plan thoughtfully for the present and future.

CONCLUSION

As Joel Barker (1991) said so eloquently, “Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision is just passing the time. Vision with action can change the world.” The devilish details of Tier 2 intervention include those at the strategic and implementation levels. Only when a district attends to both levels of detail will it succeed at realizing the potential of RTI as a catalyst for achieving better results. ■

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