

RTI in Middle Schools: Frequently Asked Questions

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Introduction

Middle schools across the country are investigating how response to intervention (RTI) might academically benefit their adolescent student populations. Much is left to be learned about the efficacy of elementary school RTI models applied in secondary settings (National High School Center, National Center on Response to Intervention, & Center on Instruction, 2010). Many practical and logistical questions have emerged as state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) investigate and implement an RTI model, based on elementary frameworks, at the secondary level. In the absence of research-based evidence about how the essential components of RTI can be implemented in middle schools, the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) has developed this document to assist middle schools as they attempt to implement RTI. We provide some common questions and potential answers through a review of practices and the use of snapshots and descriptions of specific RTI practices at 42 middle schools. The answers in this resource are based on the experiences of the schools involved in this project (see the Appendix). The participating schools' practices are offered as an overview of current practices across their contexts. As a caution, however, these practices may not be effective in other schools. This brief is meant to provide additional descriptive information to practitioners with background knowledge of the essential components of an RTI framework.



Background Information

What Is RTI?

Based on available research and evidence-based practice, NCRTI uses the following definition of RTI:

Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multilevel prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools 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. (NCRTI, 2010, p. 2) http://rti4success.org/pdf/rtiessentialcomponents_042710.pdf.)

The NCRTI maintains there are four essential components of RTI:

1. Universal screening
2. Progress monitoring
3. A multilevel prevention system
4. Data-based decision making

Additional Information

More information about middle school RTI, including the essential components, scheduling, RTI implementation, and tools for adolescents, is at <http://www.rti4success.org>. NCRTI continuously updates relevant information and resources. For schools interested, the NCRTI provides tool charts for currently available RTI tools and includes classification accuracy, reliability, and validity for screening assessments (<http://rti4success.org/screeningTools>), progress monitoring assessments (<http://rti4success.org/progressMonitoringTools>), and instructional intervention programs (<http://rti4success.org/instructionTools>).



Screening

NCRTI defines screening as quick and efficient assessments administered two to three times per year to determine if students are meeting the learning goals and benchmarks appropriate for their grade levels. When students fall below a predetermined cut point on a screening tool, in-depth testing or short-term progress monitoring may be conducted to more accurately predict which students are truly at risk for poor learning outcomes (NCRTI, 2010, p. 5).

How Are Schools Identifying Students Who Are at Risk for Poor Learning Outcomes?

When identifying students at risk for poor learning outcomes, the participating schools reported screening activities that closely followed NCRTI's definition and elementary school practices. All middle school personnel emphasized the value they have found for continuing formal screening assessments of their entire school populations, which enabled them to continue to identify potentially at-risk students who need more intense instruction or intervention.

Uncertainty exists related to the necessity and purpose of formal screening assessments in secondary settings because students begin middle school with a school performance history and thus existing data records (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010). In the schools we visited, middle school personnel regarded past performance history as a valuable piece of screening data in their decision-making process and as a reliable indicator of future academic performance. In addition, middle school personnel thought that they needed current screening assessment data for their adolescent populations to fully understand their students' academic needs.

One principal stated,

Because we are screening so quickly, we see problems in real time, so we are catching kids before there is a major deficit, and we are catching kids who are experiencing problems.

Many participating middle schools chose screening assessment(s) and established screening procedures as one of their first steps when implementing RTI. Administrators and leadership team members reviewed their school's needs to establish the

- Tool(s) for screening.
- Screening procedures.
- Frequency of assessment.

Leadership team members researched the types of tools available and the procedures that best met the needs of their adolescent student population. Many middle school personnel discussed the involvement of district staff when they chose screening assessment tools. The district staff assisted principals and leadership teams set expected outcomes, established priorities and resource needs, and participated in tool selection. Furthermore, school staff often collaborated with neighboring schools and districts and communicated with their SEAs to choose a screening assessment procedure.

Screening Tools Used

The three most commonly used screening tools with the participating schools were as follows:

1. Published national- and state-normed tools (e.g., AIMSweb, Measures of Academic Progress [MAP])
2. Criterion-based assessments designed to predict student performance
3. Curriculum-based measures (CBMs)



School Example: *Screening tools.*

Some schools used criterion-based tests to predict student performance on their high-stakes tests. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education created benchmark reading and math assessments (“4sight”) that align with their state assessments (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, 2011). These low-stakes, predictive assessments were designed as a way to inform school staff regarding student performance throughout the year in targeted instruction. Other SEAs and LEAs can learn about their criterion-based assessment at <http://www.pattan.net/teachlead/AssessingtoLearn.aspx>.

School Example: *Using multiple measures.*

As an example of using multiple screening assessments, another school used district-normed CBMs for reading (Maze), math (mixed basic facts), and writing (correct writing sequence) with predetermined cut scores to identify the at-risk status of the students. A three-person team consisting of the school psychologist, the student achievement teacher, and the principal administered the screenings for the entire school three times each year. Middle schools just starting with RTI may want to consider beginning with one academic screening area at a time before adding additional screening assessments.

How Often Have Middle Schools Administered Screening Assessments?

The majority of the schools included in this project screened students three times per year, with the schools reporting a range of one to four times. Administrators reported that collecting screening data two to three times each school year gave school staff a record of the baseline performance of the students and helped to determine midyear needs and changes.

Middle schools just starting might find screening two to three times a year challenging for time and resources. Schools might consider starting with one or two screening administrations per year to determine their needs. In the upper grades, if screening scores stay relatively steady, schools may determine they will not need to screen three times each year, but that perhaps one to two administrations are sufficient.

Although each school varied slightly in administration, time frame, instruments, and data analysis, the schools agreed that screening was a foundational component in their RTI models. Prior to the start of the school year, school staff would schedule the weeks in which they would administer their screening assessments, which was dependent on how often and when in the year they needed to make instructional decisions.

For example, screening two times per year may occur at the following times:

- Fall: August 29 to September 2
- Winter: December 5–9



Several administrators referred to the importance of collecting data from midyear screening assessments. With a midyear screening assessment, school staff could identify if any of the following applied:

- Students' at-risk status changed (e.g., if students began struggling mid-year).
- Students were making expected schoolwide gains.
- Classes were making expected classwide gains.

One middle school principal said,
As the complexity of reading increases as you go from one grade to another, you still can't forget about those universal screens that may scoop up some students you may have missed before because they were making it with their understanding at one level, but the bar got raised and now they're falling behind. So you have to maintain your universal screens because it allows you to truly identify the students who you need to get into your program.



Multilevel Prevention/ Intervention System

NCRTI defines multilevel prevention/intervention systems as systems that include three levels of intensity or prevention. The primary prevention level (often called tier 1) includes high-quality core instruction. The secondary level (often called tier 2) includes evidence-based interventions of a moderate intensity, and the tertiary level (often called tier 3) includes individualized interventions. These individualized interventions are of increased intensity and are intended for students who show minimal response to intervention (NCRTI, 2010).

How Do We Ensure That Our Primary Level of Prevention (Core Curriculum) Is Effective?¹

The middle school administrators we interviewed indicated that their most important focus in RTI is to solidify their general education instruction—to have at least 80 percent of their students meeting proficiency. As one principal said, “Our big bucks go into [primary prevention].” The methods the schools used for improving their general education instruction varied.

Standardized Curriculum

Several school administrators credited their district leadership for investing in a research-based, districtwide core curriculum that aligned with state standards. Implementing a standardized curriculum in the district ensured that all students in all classes received the same objectives. For example, students in Mr. Smith’s sixth grade math class in School A received the same lesson in the same week as Ms. Jones’ sixth grade math class in School B. Of course, these teachers also used teaching techniques such as differentiated instruction to reach the general populations of their classrooms.

As one assistant superintendent stated,

All of our ships were heading in different directions, and we had to make sure that everyone in the district was on the same page and heading in the same direction.

In this district, each school had been responsible for its own curriculum. This meant that students entering middle school from the various elementary schools had different learning experiences and differing levels of proficiency. Having a standardized curriculum is especially helpful when districts have high rates of mobility within the district.

Professional Development

One urban school district first focused its RTI efforts on implementing a districtwide curriculum that aligned with its state’s standards and provided their entire staff with professional development to implement the new curriculum with fidelity. Fidelity of implementation was an important and significant factor in ensuring that students received the scientifically research-based instruction as it was designed to be delivered.

Continuous and focused professional development was a significant investment. Many schools ensured that all their staff members received appropriate professional development in differentiated instruction and other instructional strategies that could be implemented across content areas (i.e., explicit instruction and providing corrective and immediate feedback). When providing professional development for a new curriculum, many schools’ expert staff supported newly prepared staff by modeling, coaching, and providing feedback until the staff members successfully implemented the instructional curriculum independently and with fidelity.

¹ The primary level of prevention is the general education content area classes and electives in which the majority of students participate. In this document, we often use the terms *primary prevention*, *core curriculum*, and *general education* interchangeably.



What Differentiates Secondary- and Tertiary-Level Interventions From the Core Curriculum?

A big question for secondary schools is whether it is necessary and possible to have multiple levels of intervention. The participating middle schools implemented RTI with the intention of providing increasing intense levels of instruction to their adolescent students. Participating schools reported that some of the challenges for providing one or two levels of intervention classes were rearranging staff time to teach smaller groups, scheduling the classes, and finding appropriate resources.

When screening data indicated that a group of students did not meeting the school's predetermined levels of proficiency, those students received intensified instruction in either secondary- or tertiary-level interventions. The participating middle schools intensified their instruction in several ways:

- Smaller class sizes for specialized classes (e.g., a 1:10 teacher-to-student ratio)
- Homogeneous classes of students with similar instructional needs
- Expert teachers prepared to deliver instruction in the specific areas of concern
- Increases in the frequency and duration of instruction

Secondary-Level Interventions

In secondary-level interventions, many of the schools interviewed for this project also used standard protocol interventions (i.e., research-based, validated, prepackaged, scripted instructional programs for reading and mathematics). Most schools had a menu of standard protocol interventions from which to choose when determining students' instructional needs.

As one principal stated,

We try, at our [secondary level], to put our students in [homogenous groups] as best we can with similar deficiencies, or areas of weakness, so that we can really target instruction.

Who Teaches Secondary-Level Interventions and When Are Interventions Provided?

In many middle schools, general education teachers taught secondary-level intervention classes during elective class time for a full-class period (e.g., 45 minutes, 5 days a week). Some schools offered classes in a block framework, in which classes met every other day for a longer period of time (e.g., 1.5 class periods in length). Other schools were able to hire interventionists, whose sole job was to teach the more intensive classes. Whatever their background, all teachers of intervention classes were specifically prepared to teach the intensive instructional methods.

Tertiary-Level Interventions

The tertiary-level is considered the most intensive level of individualized instruction for students who have demonstrated minimal response to previous research-based instruction and need a more intensive, individualized approach. If a school's primary level of prevention is strong, only a small percentage of a school's student population should need this level of instruction. The schools surveyed employed various techniques to provide students with such intensive instruction. Some examples are as follows:

- **Class sizes.** Class sizes for schools with tertiary-level classes reported a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:3 or smaller.²

² The Texas LD Center found that group sizes between 1:5 and 1:10 had minimal differences in students' performance outcomes, indicating little evidence that adolescent students have to be in small groups in tertiary-level classes (<http://www.texasldcenter.org/research/project3.asp>).



- **Individualized instruction.** The instructional techniques were designed for each individual student's specific deficits.
- **Increased instructional time.** Students often received a daily tertiary-level class in addition to a secondary-level class and the core-level general education classes (i.e., three periods per day).

Several participating principals emphasized that they were invested in ensuring that all students have access to the core curriculum, although they provide extra help in the form of differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, and supplement instruction with intensive-level classes. Most school staff did not want the tertiary-level of instruction to be a replacement of the core, but rather a supplement to gain the necessary academic skills to be successful in the core.

One principal explained,

Each tier 3 [class] has 3–4 students. They work to keep the instruction aligned with the tier 1 grade level curriculum. Having students working on skills they can apply to the general education classroom is important, too. The gap seems huge for those struggling middle school students; but with the specialized instruction, those students are gaining some confidence, which motivates them to be more invested in the classroom.

When Are Tertiary-Level Interventions Provided?

To accommodate students needing tertiary-level support, the surveyed schools did one of the following:

- Used all the students' elective time (student was in two intervention classes) for secondary- and tertiary-level classes.
- Removed students from a core-level class.

For example, the most commonly replaced core classes were social studies or science class time with the intervention class. Removal from either a core class or an elective class provided students the opportunity to gain the strategies and skills they needed to return to and succeed in general education classes. When students reentered their core-level classes, their teachers helped the student catch up with the rest of the class by offering additional in-class help, peer tutoring, or afterschool tutoring. The school staff reported that students quickly picked up missed content.

Who Taught These Classes?

Frequently, intervention teachers and special education instructors taught tertiary-level classes. Many times, instruction was provided in a coteaching model with general education, paraprofessionals, or other assistant teachers, thus reducing class sizes. When paraprofessionals or other assistants were in the classrooms, the lead, expert teacher carefully supervised them, as their role was to support the lead teacher in carrying out the specified interventions, not to make instructional decisions.



What Is the Difference Between Tertiary-Level Interventions and Special Education?

In most of the participating schools, tertiary-level instruction and special education were not synonymous. Middle school staff worked to ensure that their instructional models met the needs of their entire student populations, regardless of any identification of a disability. Most schools relied on their most expert staff to provide the most intense instruction.

Although some schools designated the tertiary level of intervention as special education, most participating middle schools provided students special education services (when necessary) throughout their multilevel interventions (e.g., students receiving special education services were provided the level of instruction and accommodations necessary according to their individualized education programs [IEPs]).

Many middle school administrators relied on their existing school resources to establish their tertiary levels of intervention, such as the following:

- Special education teachers who are expertly prepared and able to teach and support students
- Instructional strategies and programs that are research- and evidence-based and effective for struggling students

How Did Schools Use RTI Data When Determining Eligibility?

Although many students would have been identified in elementary school for a specific learning disability, some students are not identified until they reach middle school. Several of the participating schools used RTI data when considering a student for a comprehensive

evaluation. However, none of schools participating in this project relied solely on RTI data to determine whether a student had a specific learning disability. Rather, when a student was continuously nonresponsive to all levels of intervention, the team used the data to recommend a comprehensive evaluation based on their state's rules and regulations.

School Example: *When special education services and tertiary-level interventions are synonymous.*

Although most participating schools did not equate the tertiary level of intervention as special education, we can provide an example of one participating middle school that established its tertiary level as special education. Although this school's tertiary level of intervention and its special education services were synonymous, like most other RTI frameworks we viewed, the students in special education could receive primary-, secondary-, and tertiary-level interventions, depending on their needs and their IEPs. In this school, the tertiary level individualized instruction fit each student's specific academic or behavioral needs. The instructional staff often used a combination of in-class (co-teaching) instruction supported with direct, small group instruction. When co-teaching, the general and special education teachers worked with small groups of students in both general and special education. During elective time, special education teachers taught tertiary-level courses focused on basic skills classes for students with disabilities. One small group of students received an additional basic skills reading class in lieu of a social studies class and therefore received three periods of reading instruction per day. Students received a minimum of 45 minutes of intensive instruction each day, although the group of students with the additional reading class received up to 140 minutes each day, thus illustrating that the tertiary level of intervention is individualized based on each student's instructional needs.



Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is used to assess students' performance over time, to quantify student rates of improvement or responsiveness to instruction, to evaluate instructional effectiveness, and for students who are least responsive to effective instruction, to formulate effective individualized programs. Progress monitoring tools must accurately represent students' academic development and must be useful for instructional planning and assessing student learning. In addition, in tertiary prevention, educators use progress monitoring to compare a student's expected and actual rates of learning. If a student is not achieving the expected rate of learning, the educator experiments with instructional components in an attempt to improve the rate of learning (NCRTI, 2010, p 6–7).

What Tools Are Schools Using for Progress Monitoring?

Our sample of middle schools indicated that establishing systematic progress monitoring practices was a challenging process. One of the challenges that middle schools face when establishing a routine for progress monitoring is finding suitable tools for the following:

- Adolescent students
- Content areas (e.g., numeracy assessments)
- Appropriate frequency for each intervention
- The school's curriculum benchmarks and standards

Overall, the participating schools used a wide variety of tools and varying practices. Most of the schools provided interventions and progress monitoring for literacy and numeracy.

Reading

Over half of the participating schools reported that they used multiple tools to monitor progress in

reading, and they used published, nationally available assessments (such as AIMSweb). About one fourth of the schools used locally written CBMs, and about one fourth used measures included with the various reading intervention curricula taught in their intensive classes.

Math

Many schools reported struggling with identifying appropriate measures for numeracy. Most used a nationally published CBM, and the others used district- and school-normed CBMs. Other common progress monitoring tools included measures bundled with the math intervention curricula used in their intervention classes.

How Often Does Progress Monitoring Take Place at Each Instructional Level (Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary)?

Most of the participating schools reported that they did not regularly monitor progress in the primary level of instruction. Rather, they depended on the data from screening measures to identify the progress of the general student population to determine which students needed tiered interventions. However, several schools reported that they regularly monitored progress using formative assessments, with the frequency ranging from every three weeks to every six weeks.

The majority of the schools monitored progress regularly in the secondary and tertiary levels, meaning that these schools had established a set schedule of how frequently students receiving tiered interventions were given a formative assessment designed to measure their progress in the applied intervention.

At the secondary level of intervention, progress monitoring typically occurred at least every other week, though once per month was not uncommon. Importantly, about half of the schools monitored progress once a week or more frequently (e.g., two times per week).



For example, one principal stated,

The [secondary level] students are progress monitored every fifth day. So far, the data show[s](sic) that the students are making good progress, but it is slow progress.

At the tertiary level of intervention, the surveyed schools reported progress monitoring as few as two times per month or as often as daily, and half of the schools reported progress monitoring on a weekly basis. Several schools reported that progress monitoring at the tertiary level of instruction varied according to individual student needs and the interventions implemented.

For our most at-risk students, those who are farthest off of grade level, progress monitoring needs to be the most frequent.

How Do Schools Analyze Their Progress Monitoring Results to Indicate Whether a Student Is or Is Not Responding to the Intervention?

Progress monitoring data provide information to staff members about the success of the interventions, for both individual students and entire intervention programs. Frequent progress monitoring data provide teachers and students with immediate feedback about whether students are reaching their learning goals and if the intervention meets students' needs. When determining responsiveness, many schools use a trend line with three to six data points, and they make instructional decisions based on students' progress toward a

goal score (or a calculated aim line). Instructional decisions are often made in a team setting by using multiple data sources (e.g., screening scores, progress monitoring data, formative assessments, behavior reports, and grades).

Most of the participating schools actively involved their students in their own data collection and graphing.

Students...have to be involved in their progress monitoring because... the student, especially at the middle school level where they are very savvy and very aware that they are not in the same place as their peers... [has] to know that they are making growth. They have to see their small gains or large gains and be able to celebrate.

Many schools used publisher-provided or state-, district-, or school-normed cut scores for their progress monitoring instruments. Common decisions based on progress monitoring data included the following:

- Continuing with an intervention if the student was making progress
- Changing an intervention
- Moving a student to a tertiary-level intervention if the student was not responsive to the secondary-level intervention after a predetermined number of data points
- Moving a student back to primary-level elective or core classes



School Example: Graphing progress monitoring data.

One school used grade-level appropriate Maze assessments to measure reading comprehension (see Figure 1). The district data analyst determined “33” as the goal score that predicted a proficient state standard score. In the students’ graph, the students and teachers then plotted “33” as their goal score. They graphed their aim line by plotting their starting score (baseline) and drawing the aim line to the scope of “33.” The staff, with full student participation, made data-based instructional decisions after plotting four data points. When students’ data showed four points above the aim line, they were considered on track; if they were four points below the aim line, the students were discussed at a data-based decision-making team meeting to review student progress in their intervention programs and possibly make an instructional change. As you can see in Figure 1, this example student is making promising progress. The student’s data points are above the aim line, and the trendline indicates the student is making appropriate gains.

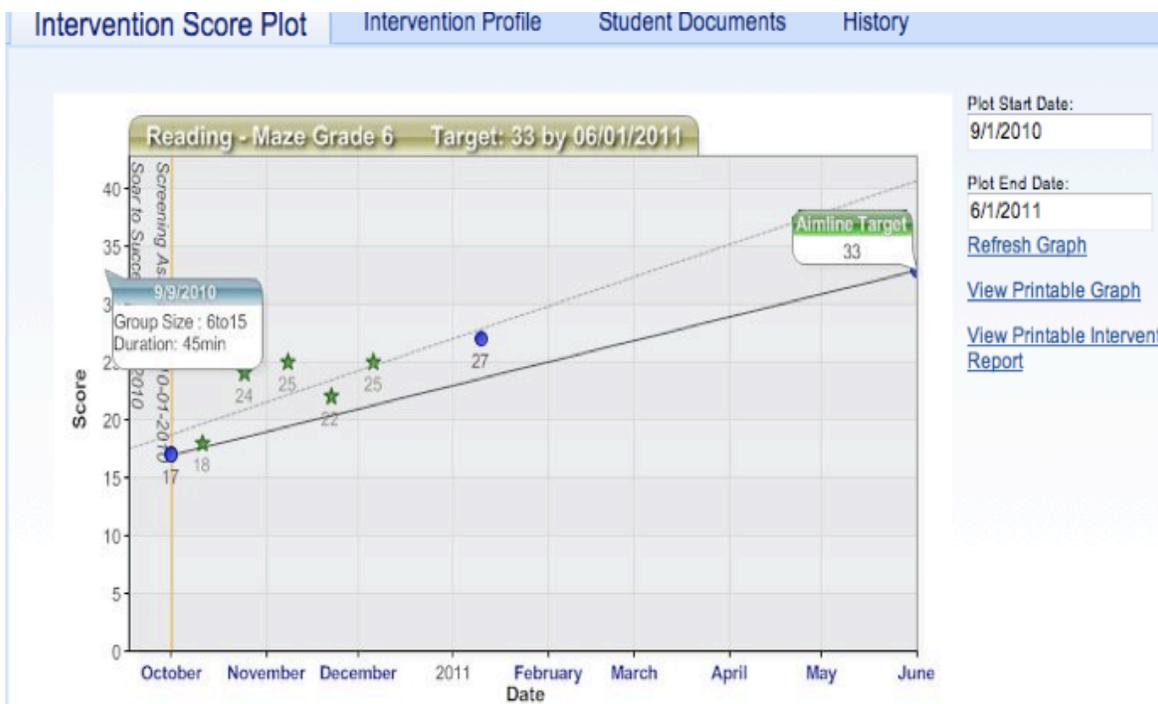
School Example: Using progress monitoring data to determine intervention effectiveness.

Progress monitoring data can also indicate if an intervention program meets the needs of a class of students. For example, in a different middle school, the data indicated that the reading intervention was ineffective for the students. After the staff established their secondary-level reading intervention program, they were perplexed that the students were not making expected gains in their reading scores and reaching their reading targets.

The principal said,

We saw the results of our literacy program, and we didn't think it was translating to gains and comprehension back in the classroom. Furthermore, the students who needed to make the greatest gains were not making gains.

Figure 1



Data-Based Decision Making

RTI uses data to inform decisions at the school, grade, or classroom levels. Screening and progress monitoring data can be aggregated and used to compare and contrast the adequacy of the core curriculum as well as the effectiveness of different instructional and behavioral strategies for various groups of students within a school. For example, if 60 percent of the students in a particular grade score below the cut point on a screening test at the beginning of the year, school personnel might consider the appropriateness of the core curriculum or whether differentiated learning activities need to be added to better meet the needs of the students in that grade (NCRTI, 2010, p. 7).

What Is the Purpose of a Data-Based Decision-Making Framework?

The purpose of a data-based decision-making framework is for school administration and teaching staff to have an established procedure to make instructional decisions that are immediately responsive to students' needs based on screening and progress monitoring data. The decision-making framework is a set of established routines and procedures for making decisions at all levels of RTI implementation and provides explicit decision rules for assessing student progress.

Staff at the participating schools established a decision-making system for collecting and analyzing data. Most of the schools in the project reported a data-based decision-making procedure that guided their process for determining which actions were appropriate. The data-based decision-making process facilitates the analysis of student data to evaluate whether students are benefiting from the instructional interventions and curriculums. Using data to drive instructional decisions was a new process for many school staff, and they often had to learn new techniques for using the assessment data to make instructional decisions, such as analyzing progress monitoring data,

identifying processes to effectively communicate students' data, and using a decision tree to make data-based instructional decisions.

One principal recommended,

There are national cut scores; there is research out there. That's how we started...we looked at what was out there already. Over time you can develop your own local cut scores, and we have done that too. But I think you can go out and look at the research and literature that's already there and that can give you a starting place.

RTI Teams

Teams played an important function in facilitating data-based decision making. To assist with the decision-making process, many of the participating schools established a data-based decision-making team (RTI team) to make student instructional decisions. One school stated, "It was the first thing we did." The schools reported that their RTI data-based decision-making teams met frequently enough to review student data to make data-driven instructional decisions.

For example, one team member told us,

We have a math and reading literacy team that analyzes data and notifies students and families of our plans. The leadership team meets weekly, and we manage any individual issues that arise.



Who Is on a Data-Based Decision Making Team?

School staff who described having a shared decision-making process were able to collectively establish the decision-making procedures and routines. Most teams included—but were not limited to—administrators, counselors, special education and general education teachers, data coordinators, RTI coordinators, coaches, and reading and math specialists.

Team Roles and Responsibilities

Some examples of the team’s responsibilities from the participating schools were as follows:

- **Agenda.** A staff member set the agenda for the team meetings and recorded the team’s instructional decisions.
- **Data.** A staff member collected and provided the student data to the rest of the team.
- **Decision-making framework.** The team established the criteria it would use to determine instructional interventions, responsiveness, and student movement.
- **Instructional decisions.** When an instructional change was made, one of the team members took responsibility for ensuring that the change was implemented.
- **Follow-up.** Teams also decided how to ensure the students involved were responsive to the interventions.
- **Communication.** A system was in place to maintain transparency of the decision-making process, decisions, and follow-up procedures for the rest of the staff and the students involved.

School Example.

One participating school principal and the staff members reported that the school’s data-based decision-making team was the reason that the school staff experienced buy-in of the RTI process. The team setting provided all school staff an opportunity to participate in, evaluate, and understand the data-based decision-making process on which instructional decisions were made. In this particular school, the RTI team consisted of the principal, the assistant principal, guidance counselors, special education teachers, RTI interventionists, and a district intervention specialist. Three general education teachers also participated in each meeting; the general education staff took turns attending each meeting, and thus all staff in the school had the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process at least one time during the school year. The team ensured the entire staff knew the meeting processes, procedures, and outcomes after every meeting. Everyone in the school had a chance to participate, collaborate, and share their knowledge. The staff members all reported placing high value on meeting participation, and their professional knowledge and expertise were pivotal to the decision-making process.



Overarching Factors

Most of the questions addressed in this brief focus on each of the essential components of RTI. The “overarching factors” relate to the entire RTI framework and are important considerations when implementing RTI.

How Does District- and School-Level Leadership Inform and Support a Successful RTI Framework?

As the previous discussions have shown, we have addressed some of the specific roles and actions of district- and school-level leadership for the essential components of RTI. Administrative leadership involvement is pivotal to ensuring the success of schoolwide implementation.

At the participating schools, district leadership often established the district’s priorities and shaped the focus and goals for the implementation activities at the schools in the district. Oftentimes, district personnel worked closely with the building principals and the RTI leadership teams to facilitate implementation activities. One of the specific activities of several districts was the development of a district guidance document to ensure districtwide common knowledge, language, and understanding of RTI. (See NCRTI’s Information Brief: Developing a Guidance Document available at <http://www.rti4success.org/resourcetype/information-brief-developing-rti-guidance-document> for more information.)

District personnel also provided direct RTI support by doing the following:

- Researching resources necessary for implementation
- Providing monetary and professional support
- Facilitating the norming of screening and progress monitoring assessments

- Establishing and aligning districtwide curricula
- Providing professional development and follow-up supporting curriculum instruction
- Participating in data-based decision-making teams
- Evaluating districtwide implementation activities

Principals at the participating schools played an integral role in implementing RTI components and processes by allowing staff the time and resources necessary to understand the language, structure, and changes, as well as the benefits and challenges of implementing RTI.

One staff member reported feeling empowered by the administrators:

The administration gave [teachers] freedom to take risks, try new things, learn from what doesn’t work, and move forward with what does work.

School staff reported that their principals were responsive to staff needs by providing the support and resources they needed for successful implementation.

Leadership is supportive of the teachers. Anything the teachers need, the administration provides it.



In the participating schools, the principals were active in all aspects of RTI and led the implementation process by doing the following:

- Establishing an RTI leadership team
- Providing professional development opportunities
- Participating in professional development
- Researching, implementing, and administering screening and progress monitoring assessments
- Researching appropriate instructional intervention strategies and programs
- Leading the data-based decision-making team meetings
- Implementing fidelity checks for instruction and assessment

How Do Schools Ensure That All Staff Members Are Knowledgeable and Highly Qualified for RTI Processes and Interventions?

The school administration and staff at the participating schools were prepared, involved, and informed about the purpose, language, framework, and expected outcomes of RTI. Administrators reported that they involved and prepared staff members through

- Frequent and open communication.
- Staff participation in team meetings.
- Appropriate professional development.

Professional Development

The administrators indicated that professional development was pivotal in ensuring that the staff were knowledgeable and prepared for RTI implementation. The participating schools' administration and staff members implemented

RTI professional development sessions throughout the school year to address the following:

- The RTI framework and expected outcomes
- Common language
- Expected outcomes
- The RTI essential components
- Instructional strategies
- Intervention programs (professional development was provided for each program)
- Supports and resources
- Fidelity of implementation

One school had weekly professional development sessions, while another had biweekly sessions specific to their RTI structure, plans, and components. Most schools reported sending teams to relevant professional development conferences and training sessions. Many used a “train the teacher” model in which their experienced staff, who were already knowledgeable in the professional development modules,

- Presented the information.
- Provided classroom support and feedback.
- Provided coaching.
- Acted as a mentor and resource for the school staff.

One school coach said,

We have every moment of professional development occupied with discussion about data, interventions, [and] RTI. We have a monthly two-hour late start, and 90 percent of that time is spent on [RTI].



Sometimes, with specific instructional curricula, schools used the instructional program's trainers. Most schools spent the majority of their professional development and in-service sessions discussing RTI.

Participating administrators discussed the importance of systematic staff leadership. School-wide staff involvement in the RTI process included working together as a team and participating in the data-based decision-making model. Often, knowledge-building activities, developing a shared understanding of RTI, and experiencing positive student outcomes led school staff to experience a school culture change. School staff reported perceptual changes, including developing a common knowledge around RTI, data-driven instructional decision making, and positive student achievement. For example, many school staff across the school sites said, "Every student can learn," and "All staff can teach all students."

Finally, hiring new staff members was essential for ensuring that the staff was a good fit with the established RTI framework. School administrators reported that they have changed their interview questions to reflect their priorities for staff qualifications. Some examples of interview questions include the following:

- "Explain how differentiated instruction looks in your classroom."
- "How would you tailor instruction to a child's individual needs?"
- "Do you understand blending?" (i.e., special education teachers can teach general education students and vice versa)
- "How would you use data to inform your instruction?"

One principal stated,

First and foremost, hire the right people to start. It was important that the people hired were highly credentialed, were really expert in the field of numeracy and literacy...and, of course, they had to have the mind-set that any child can learn.

How Have Schools Informed and Included Parents in the RTI Implementation Process?

As a prevention framework, the participating schools thought that parental involvement was pivotal to successful RTI implementation. These schools involved the parents in the education of their children: "We want to help the parents help their [children] to succeed." At minimum, the participating schools had procedures in place to notify parents when their children were placed in an intervention, but most had many techniques in place to keep their parent community informed about school activities.

Some practices to inform parents and the community about RTI activities included the following:

- Parent-friendly brochures to inform and answer commonly asked questions
- Monthly or quarterly newsletters distributed by U.S. mail or e-mail
- Community forums
- RTI-centered individual student "report cards" reporting data-based academic or behavioral growth
- Individual parent meetings about their children's data and growth
- Parent participation in data-based decision-making meetings (for their children)



School Example: *Community involvement.*

One rural school district held an annual community forum in which every community member was invited to participate. The district and school administration and school staff presented the districtwide and schoolwide data, growth, outcomes, RTI goals and processes, and district plans. The community members were also invited to participate in a decision-making process for the following year's activities.

School Example: *Information dissemination.*

Another school established a parental-information process. They began by creating an RTI-information brochure. They then produced a short video for their local cable network channel that described the data, what RTI means for parents, how it will help their children, and what questions to ask. When it was time for parent-teacher conferences, parents asked informed questions, were shown graphs of the data, and were shown how their children were doing in the process. This school also established "fluency nights," in which school staff taught parents easy fluency strategies to use at home with their children. This example school district attributed their students' increase in reading scores data to an increase in parental involvement, combined with the school RTI framework. "It makes a huge difference to involve the parents."



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Appendix

Our Approach

NCRTI staff used a mixed-method evaluation model to collect descriptive data from middle schools that were implementing RTI. They conducted telephone interviews with school administrators, held on-site administrative and staff discussion groups, observed multilevel prevention classes, and observed meetings with district and middle school personnel about the conceptualization, implementation, essential components, outcomes, and current status of their RTI practices.

NCRTI staff used a snowball sampling method from such venues as school websites, RTI summits, conference presentations, self-nomination, peer nomination, and publications to initially identify potential middle school sites that exhibited some level of RTI planning and implementation. We then contacted 82 schools and asked them to participate in this project. Forty-two schools agreed to participate and also met our initial selection criteria of implementing the four essential components of RTI. We conducted in-depth, two-hour phone interviews with staff from these 42 schools.

The next stage of data collection involved telephone-based data-collection surveys. At a minimum, we sought to include schools with the following criteria (based on Shinn, 2008):

- One screening assessment at least once per year in one content area
- Progress monitoring at least once per month for secondary-level interventions
- Progress monitoring at least two times per month for tertiary-level interventions
- At least three levels (or tiers) of prevention
- A predetermined data-based decision-making process

We invited 20 schools that met all of these selection criteria to participate in the follow-up phone survey. Of the 20 schools invited, 17 school administrators participated in the follow-up data collection phone survey that included questions to obtain information related to the following:

- Data collection activities
- Schoolwide screening scores
- Progress monitoring data collection
- Student movement in the multilevel prevention system
- The number of students at each instructional level
- The fidelity of implementation practices
- Professional development practices

When the schools demonstrated positive student outcomes based on their data, we asked to visit the site to observe RTI practices and identify implementation characteristics that were common among the middle schools. We visited 12 middle schools. Most of these 12 schools served sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.



The schools were rural, suburban, and urban and located in all regions of the United States: Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West. The schools' populations ranged from a low of 172 students to a high of 1,436 students, with the median population at 658 students.

The schools were diverse in regard to economically disadvantaged students. Measured by percentage of reported free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranged from a low of 7.9 percent to a high of 81.1 percent of the school population. The schools' ethnic diversity also varied. The nonwhite population ranged from a low of 5.1 percent to a high of 82.6 percent of the schools' populations. The average nonwhite population was 30 percent.

The on-site visits included four components:

1. Three discussion groups with school faculty about implementation processes, staff roles, benefits for students and staff, challenges, and next steps
2. An interview with the principal about implementation activities, professional development, the leadership team, scheduling, structures, staffing, resources, and the role of parents
3. Observations of team meetings to gather information about data-based decision making, discussion structure, agenda, staff involvement, frequency, and length
4. Observations of classes at each intervention level, focusing on class structure, length, the number of students, instructional program/strategy, adherence, exposure, quality of delivery, program differentiation, and student engagement



About the National Center on Response to Intervention

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas have established the National Center on Response to Intervention. The Center provides technical assistance to states and districts and builds the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven response to intervention frameworks.



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