

Participant Feedback from the Fifth McKee Learning Lunch

Response to Intervention (RTI)

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This learning experience was sponsored by the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

The enactment of Public Law 94-142—federal legislation that was passed in 1975 on behalf of students with disabilities—gave rise to a continuous struggle to determine which students are qualified to receive the services that the law accords. Unfortunately, school personnel tended to respond to the law by over-referring students who struggle academically. In order to provide alternative recommendations to special education, the rate of over-referral brought about the creation of alternative selection processes, beginning with such interventions as pre-referral screening and referral committees.

As the trend continued, instructional-support alternatives and other measures emerged, such as the formation of screening teams and the employment of alternative-support teachers. The most effective of these strategies were the Instructional Support Teams, or ISTs, of Pennsylvania (Kovaleski, Tucker, & Duffy, 1995; Kovaleski, Tucker, & Stevens, 1996). Their efficacy led to the national adoption of yet another strategy: Response to Intervention, or RTI. More recently, the evolution of intervention strategies based on the IST concept occurred with the introduction of the Multi-tiered Support System, or MTSS. Indeed, all iterations of the original IST idea are attempts to determine the most effective way to meet the needs of individual students who are unsuccessful in school but who do not have a disability.

Introduced in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, in 2004, the implementation of RTI currently is federally mandated. The State of Tennessee responded to the requirement by instituting its own version of RTI, called Response to Instruction and Intervention, or RTI-squared.

In spite of the popularity of these approaches and their success in providing alternatives to special-education placement, the dispute about the best way to provide such alternatives persists. The debate has led to several questions about what RTI is, what is supposed to do, and how it is supposed to be implemented under federal and state laws.

This McKee Learning Lunch provided a forum for local educators to discuss the issues around RTI and to generate additional questions that need to be addressed. We were fortunate that Tie Hodack was our speaker. Tie, who is Executive Director of Instructional Programs for the Tennessee Department of Education, coordinates the development of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in Tennessee.

In accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, there were three general feedback opportunities, or Assignments 1, 2, and 3. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, provided their insights into and questions about the topic. These responses are presented below.

Note: In several responses, participants refer to TNCore, Tennessee's format to address the common-core state-standards agenda. A full description of TNCore appears as an appendix to this report.

Assignment 1

Pre-discussion Question: Prior to the presentation and discussion, what question(s) do you have about this topic? The responses follow.

Implementing and Evaluating RTI

- Is Tier-1 instruction really included in TNCore?
- Will RTI have an impact on services for post-secondary settings and for such high-stakes standardized tests as the ACT and the SAT?
- What additional guidance is needed? Where are the communication breakdowns?
- Will the State review the impact of RTI on student achievement? If so, how will it be done? What support in the form of training, resources, and funding are planned to keep RTI active in our schools?

Staffing, Support, and Resources

- How do schools staff RTI-squared, particularly in schools with transient populations? Are there specific tools and materials used in intervention to allow comparison between and among schools, both qualitatively and quantitatively?
- Why did it take Tennessee so long to adopt RTI-squared? As we are in the process of implementing it now, who has been invited to assist teachers, [special-education efforts, and so on] with the implementation?
- How can we ensure that Tier-1, Core Instruction, is of high quality for all of our students?
- How do we support schools that have a large number of students qualifying for Tier-II intervention?
- In lower-performing schools, students are involved with Core Instruction but lack of support at home and in the community has caused many of them to need Tier-2 intervention. How do we address this life circumstance? Core Instruction is occurring, but the students aren't ready to learn.
- Who is going to help to fix and focus on Core Instruction? Is this working?
- Is anyone from the State analyzing all the demands on time already required of elementary-school teachers?

Statistics and Success

- Given that students may not need to move through both tiers in their entirety before an exceptional-education referral, how do the data points factor in?
- Is the 25% in Tier 2 determined by the school, or is it determined by norm-referenced tests?
- How long should it take before a district implementing RTI with fidelity to experience a positive outcome on district-level student achievement?
- Why are some schools and districts successful while others are not?

RTI and Special Education

- [With reference to the] 80% to 85% in Tier 1, does that mean that 80% to 85% of all students need Tier 1, or does that mean that 80% to 85% of students in need of RTI will be

at Tier 1? Why does Tennessee sometimes say RTI is only for severely learning-disabled students rather than for all students?

- How does Tier-3 instruction and intervention differ from special education [in function and application]? What about students who are receiving pre-RTI-squared special-education services that lack the instruction?
- How have the guidelines changed for exceptional-education teachers working with non-exceptional-education students?
- How do we get schools to adopt RTI as an alternative to pullout programs?
- By definition, 25% of all students stay at or below the 25th percentile, so how can only 10% to 15% qualify for Tier 2? I'm hearing [that getting] special-education services for learning-disabled [students] takes longer than ever under RTI-squared—at least at this time.

Assignment 2

Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants, in groups of four, discussed three assigned questions. The questions and responses follow.

Question 1. What does RTI mean to you?

Part of a Larger Effort

- Multi-tiered approach to early intervention and prevention
- Not a means to an end
- Combination of help

Focuses on Students' Needs

- Diagnose student needs and using data to make instructional decisions
- Understand a student's instructional level and adjust appropriately in order to aid progression
- Provide remediation and enrichment
- Focus on reading first in order to achieve reading excellence

Question 2. Why is RTI important?

Promotes Cooperation in Schools

- Encourages collaboration
- Compels schools to incorporate an intervention plan into their systems if one does not already exist
- Is proactive and produces immediate support

Benefits Student Achievement

- Closes gaps
- Focuses on the development of basic skills
- Provides individualized instruction
- Affords opportunities for student advancement
- Provides opportunities for students to reach their potential

Question 3. What are the difficulties in implementing RTI?

Support and Resources Needed

- Funding
- Training
- Timing, data-review, intervention implementation
- Staffing
- Resources

Uniformity and Stability

- Clear up blurred lines in the mandate
- Provide consistency
- Make necessary changes in leadership
- Uproot [other] systems that have been in place and thereby eliminate the juggling of two systems
- Get to the point where Tier 1 is foundationally sound in the TNCore curriculum

Possible Negative Results of Implementing RTI-squared

- Putting too much focus on the special-education population and neglecting the general-education population
- Shifting current resources around compromises the area(s) the resources are pulled from
- Parents may feel that their child is stuck in a tier
- Harsh demands made

Assignment 3

Post-discussion Question: After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to two additional questions.

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?

Communication Needed

- The district has not given us a complete picture of RTI. What the State shared [is] tremendous news!
- The State wants to hear from and work with us.
- There is a continuous need for partnerships and clarifying talks.
(2 participants)

Positive Aspects

- There is more flexibility than thought with RTI, and there is more to learn.
(2 participants)
- RTI is flexible (3 participants).
- Credits can be earned through RTI for secondary students. (2 participants)
- There are great people doing great things for RTI in schools.
- A child who has a 504 plan on an IEP can also participate in RTI-squared.

Common Understanding and Training

- Training is needed in higher-education institutions. Do graduates understand? Will they be trained on how to implement RTI?
- We are all facing very similar issues and concerns. (3 participants)
- We share a common focus on students and their success.

Question 2. What unanswered question(s) are you leaving with?

Training and Resources

- Will future teachers be trained in RTI?
- How do we get this type of presentation to our students at UTC in the teacher-education program?
- If the state department is offering support, will it be accepted?
- Will there be adequate resources for RTI-squared? Will there be a model to follow for successful implementation with regard to time-management and scheduling?
- Where will resources to implement RTI come from?

Implementation and Models

- What's next?
- Will higher education take a more direct role in RTI?
- What does exceptional-education and general-education scheduling look like? Can exceptional-education teachers work with non-exceptional-education students?
- Will the State take groups to visit schools where RTI-squared is being implemented successfully? Or will it pair RTI schools with non-RTI schools for the same purpose?
- How do teachers and parents know when there are "reasonable suspicions" to make a special-education referral on an RTI-squared model?

Delivery and Support

- [Given that there are different interpretations of how to implement RTI], is RTI too flexible?
- What universal screeners give you the best information for implementing RTI?
- How do we, as a community, support schools that have a large number of Tier-2 and Tier-3 students?
- Where will we be in 5 years with the implementation of RTI?
- What changes are in store for RTI, if any? How quickly will we be notified about the modifications / changes?

References

- Kovaleski, J. F., Tucker, J. A., & Stevens, L. J. (1996). Bridging special and regular education: The Pennsylvania initiative. *Educational Leadership*, 53(5), 44-47.
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Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

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Priscilla Tucker. Educational writer, editor, and consultant

Appendix

Response to Intervention and TNCore

It is important to note that the Response to Intervention (RTI) concept is a fundamental provision of federal law and that it is to be applied by each state in the way that it is most effective. In Tennessee, the implementation of RTI began slowly and deliberately and has been renamed RTI². In addition, RTI² often is associated with the state's application of TNCore, Tennessee's format to address the common-core state-standards agenda. The following information represents the official position of the Tennessee Department of Education on this this national agenda

What are the Common Core State Standards? The Common Core State Standards are Tennessee's new standards in English language arts and math. They establish clarity about what students should know and be able to do when completing each grade, K–12, in math and English language arts in order to be on track for readiness for college or career.

What subjects are included in the Common Core State Standards? The Common Core State Standards focus solely on math and English language arts. Common Core State Standards do not cover content in science, social studies, or other subject areas.

Who leads the Common Core State Standards Initiative? The nation's governors and education commissioners, through their representative organizations the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), led the development of the Common Core State Standards and continue to lead the initiative. Teachers, parents, school administrators, and experts from across the country, together with state leaders, provided input into the development of the standards.

Is it the same thing as curriculum? No, standards are different from curriculum; standards represent the goal for what students should learn and curriculum is a road map for how to meet those goals or standards. Districts, schools, and teachers determine the curriculum, through textbooks and plans and materials created by teachers and districts. Curriculum and instruction will continue to be local decisions, as those closest to students are best positioned to know how to support their learning.

Why did Tennessee adopt Common Core State Standards? In Tennessee, the decision to adopt the Common Core State Standards was made by the governor and the State Board of Education. The standards were adopted in July 2010 and represent the next step in the work the state had previously begun to strengthen standards through the adoption of the Tennessee Diploma Project standards. In 2007, the governor and General Assembly pushed for increased accountability in public education by raising academic standards. That year, more than 130 business leaders from across Tennessee worked with the governor and key legislators to articulate a vision for public education in the future—all high-school graduates ready for a career or college. It is vital for the economic competitiveness of our state that employers are able to find skilled people for jobs in Tennessee. Based on multiple assessments, such as the ACT and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Tennessee students are less well prepared for life after high school—both those headed to college and those joining the

workforce—than students in some neighboring states.

How do the standards fit with the Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework?

The Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) framework and standards are fundamentally linked. Both RTI² and the Tennessee state standards require high expectations for all students. RTI² is designed to help all students reach their potential. As the rigor and knowledge demands increase for students through the implementation of the Tennessee state ELA and math standards, RTI² provides the needed support for students through interventions to ensure that all students receive the support they need. Within the 3-Tier RTI² model, Tier I is where all students receive research-based, high quality, general education instruction using the Tennessee state standards for ELA and mathematics.

TNCore: [Tennessee] Department of Education
Candice McQueen, Commissioner
<http://www.tncore.org/faqs.aspx>