

The Core Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Leadership, Parent Involvement, and Cultural Responsivity

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CEEP SPECIAL REPORT SERIES ON INDIANA'S VISION OF RTI . . .

- ✓ *Indiana's Vision of Response to Intervention*
- ✓ *The Core Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Evidence-based Core Curriculum, Progress Monitoring, and Data-based Decision Making*
- ✓ *The Core Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Leadership, Parent Involvement, and Cultural Responsivity*

INTRODUCTION

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework of service delivery for addressing the needs of all students (within both general and special education) by embedding best practice and differentiated, evidence-based instruction in the classroom, and using scientific, research-based intervention (IDOE, 2009). *Indiana's Vision of Response to Intervention*, the first Special Report in this three-part series issued by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy (CEEP), introduced the RTI framework as an effective mechanism in the prevention and intervention of both academic and behavioral problems for all students in K-12 education. The report discussed the research and policy impetus for the use of the RTI framework, as well as what the state of Indiana is currently doing to support this new initiative. Specifically, Indiana's Department of Education (IDOE) has devised a framework of RTI that addresses six core components on which to focus: (1) evidence-based curriculum, instruction, intervention, and extension; (2) assessment and progress monitoring; (3) data-based decision making; (4) leadership; (5) family, school, and community partnerships; and (6) cultural responsivity.

The second Special Report, *The Core Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Evidence-based Core Curriculum, Assessment and Progress Monitoring, and Data-based Decision Making*, addressed in greater detail the IDOE's first three core components of RTI as conceived by the IDOE. This final Special Report will explore the last three core components of the Indiana RTI framework which include: leadership; family, school, and community partnerships; and cultural responsivity.

LEADERSHIP

What is Leadership, and What Makes an Effective Leader?

The Wallace Foundation, a non-profit foundation committed to promoting learning and enrichment opportunities, stated that educational leadership has been called the "bridge" that can bring together many different reform efforts in remarkable ways (2007). In order to get the best and most qualified leaders in every school, it is not sufficient to simply improve their training—states and districts must also strive to create standards that clearly state expectations about what leaders need to know and do to improve instruction and learning. Furthermore, these standards should form the basis for holding leaders accountable for results. States and districts should also create conditions and incentives that support the ability of leaders to meet those standards. These include: "the availability of data to inform leaders' decisions; the authority to direct needed resources to the schools and students with the greatest needs; and policies that affect the recruitment, hiring, placement, and evaluation of school leaders" (The Wallace Foundation, 2007).

The importance of having successful and strong school leadership is discussed by the Center on Educational Policy in a 2003 brief on successful school leadership. The authors of the brief, Leithwood and Riehl, note certain conclusions can be drawn about successful school leadership, including: 1) Outside of family income and educational attainment variables, the quality of curriculum and instruction has the largest effect on student learning, followed by leadership. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state that studies have found the effects of leadership on student learning to be small but educationally significant. Leaders influence student success in learning by

helping to promote goals and by making sure teachers have the necessary resources available to teach effectively. 2) Although administrators and teacher leaders provide a great percentage of leadership in schools, the roles of teachers are currently expanding. Additionally, more team-based structures are beginning to develop where parents and students are recognized as potential sources of leadership. 3) A core set of leadership practices exists that is valuable in almost all educational contexts. These valuable leadership practices are: setting directions (i.e., identifying and developing school visions/goals, creating high performance expectations, promoting group goals, monitoring school performance, etc.), developing people (i.e., providing intellectual stimulation to staff members, providing them with individualized support, and providing an appropriate model consistent with the school's goals and visions), and developing the organization (i.e., developing school cultures that promote caring and trust amongst members, monitoring and adjusting the organizational structure of the school, providing staff opportunities to collaborate with school leaders, etc.). 4) Successful school leaders are able to respond positively to opportunities and meet the challenges created within the context of which they work.

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- Indiana School Teacher

Some leadership practices that help schools succeed when they are faced with various forms of accountability measures are: creating/sustaining a competitive school, empowering others to make significant decisions, providing instructional guidance by keeping up-to-date on best professional practices, and planning strategically by monitoring performance and developing improvement plans.

5) Successful leaders respond effectively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse students. This is based on findings that successful school leaders who work with diverse students strive to identify and implement forms of teaching and learning that are effective and appropriate for the diverse populations they serve. Furthermore, effective leaders create strong and supportive communities within the school and encourage the growth of students’ “social capital” (students’ knowledge/information, values, preferences, behavioral habits, and thoughts about school that have developed in part from interactions with family, community, and peers). Moreover, strong leaders nurture the development of families’ educational cultures—that is, families providing academic guidance/support for their child(ren), as well as putting in time and resources, and having high expectations for their child(ren) to succeed in school.

School personnel from 10 of the 12 site visits that the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy conducted in spring 2009 viewed buy-in from the building administrators as a key catalyst for bringing RTI implementation into their schools. For example, one teacher said of the principal at her school, “she’s been very supportive and that’s been the key.” She continued, “You can have staff that is interested [in RTI] or individuals that are interested, but unless the building administration buys into it, supports it, and talks it up...you’re not going to get anywhere because it’s such a big paradigm shift.”

Personnel Roles for Implementation of RTI

School districts typically begin by assembling a multidisciplinary team to gather information on RTI. The members chosen to comprise the district team are critical because these initial members generally become the internal experts in each district and become advisors for others during the implementation phase later on. The members of the team are chosen based on their interest in the initiative, their expertise, and because their opinions are valued by colleagues. Hall (n.d.) portrayed as an example a sample district of 19 schools, a majority of which are elementary schools. In this example, a district RTI team might consist of the following members: two elementary principals, one middle school principal, the curriculum director from the district office, and the special education district coordinator. It is important to note that RTI teams

may be comprised of different individuals, depending on the schools within the districts. Once insight has been gained about RTI and members of the initial team have decided to proceed, representatives from schools (i.e., classroom teachers, special education teachers, etc.) should be added to the district RTI team so the formation of school RTI teams can begin. At this point, the principals of the initial school team take on the leadership role of organizing RTI teams at the building level, facilitating buy-in from staff early in the exploration and conceptualization stage. The district RTI team continuously gathers and distributes information to key staff at the building level. At the school level, the RTI team serves many functions including attending workshops and conferences on RTI, visiting other schools further along in the implementation process to gain insight, and reading and distributing information to school personnel to assist in the initial and ongoing awareness of RTI. PowerPoint presentations for internal distribution, flyers, and timetables for gradual implementation specific to the school/district needs are all methods to disseminate information on RTI (Hall, n.d.).

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) recommends long-term support, resources, and leadership when implementing RTI (Wayne County RTI/LD Committee, 2007). Commitment must be well established at the district level first and then at the building administrator level. Once the district chooses to use RTI for determining academic and behavioral needs for all students, it can be implemented more smoothly. Momentum at the building level is hard to attain when support is not shown at the district level. In addition, support from building administration is crucial because implementation is dependent on a flexible financial and instructional service delivery (Batsche, n.d.).

Building Administrator

Any comprehensive reform effort to increase academic and behavioral outcomes necessitates building-level leadership. The building principal is looked to for strong leadership in implementing and leading educational reform in the school. Building administrators should lead the effort to establish an infrastructure for school-wide student screening. In addition, to ensure the fidelity of the RTI framework, administrators should oversee the implementation process; designate necessary resources such as access to evidence-based curriculum; conduct routine classroom walk-throughs, observations, and discussions to provide feedback and ensure reliability; coordinate profes-

sional development opportunities; and guide decisions regarding interventions (i.e., when/whether classrooms require interventions). Lastly, they should ensure that student data is managed properly.

The following questions should be carefully considered by building principals to determine if effective leadership is being performed when beginning to implement RTI: 1) Has sufficient time been provided to cultivate an understanding of RTI? 2) What behaviors are needed to advance the initiative in the school? 3) Have building teams been set up? 4) Are ongoing professional RTI development opportunities available in the school? 5) Has a knowledgeable individual such as an RTI coach who will assist in implementation and consultation been identified? 6) Has district-level, regional, and state-wide RTI initiative networking taken place? 7) Are data systems in place that allow for ongoing data-driven decision making? 8) Has RTI consciously become a priority for the school? (Prasse, 2008).

RTI Coach

The coach's role in RTI is to support the principal in the implementation stage and to work with colleagues to strengthen the core team in their ability to make good instructional decisions for students based on data collected. The coach is knowledgeable in the content of RTI using educational data for decision-making and evidence-based instructional practices, and in working effectively with collaborators to further students' success in school (Heimbaugh, 2008). To ensure fidelity, school coaches and teacher mentors monitor teacher progress in their instructional delivery in specific areas, provide opportunities for professional development and training, partake in teacher observations (specifically in their use of evidence-based instructional practices), and provide feedback to teachers.

When RTI coaches are used statewide, a basic foundation to support RTI implementation can be ensured, and the focus can shift toward implementation. Many statewide coaching models have a state director, regional directors, and site coaches. Communication among these members can be facilitated via phone, email, or the web. For example, the Minnesota RTI Center has incorporated technology into their weekly coaching meetings due to budgetary limits. Cohorts of approximately 10 coaches are grouped based on level of implementation. Web-based cohort meetings are facilitated once a week for approximately 45 minutes each to promote

discussion on no more than three main ideas. Minnesota coaches have found this method to be both cost and time effective. The Minnesota RTI Center aids in the RTI goals of school and student improvement (Casey, 2008).

An RTI coach mostly works with teams of educators instead of individual educators to ensure important decisions about students' needs are being addressed. Generally, schools with effective RTI models have two types of teams including the building team and the grade level/teaching team. The building team is comprised of individuals in varying professional roles in the building with expertise in academic or behavioral areas who are responsible for reviewing screening data to determine the effectiveness of the core instruction, evaluating where intervention resources are needed most, assisting in planning more intensive interventions when students are not responding to Tier 2 supports, and overseeing implementation of RTI across the building.

The grade-level (or teaching) team, is responsible for teaching students, determining which students need tiered or additional support, assigning students to intervention groups according to individual needs, determining which evidenced-based practices are best matched to the needs of each group, and then, who among the team will teach these groups. These problem-solving teams, depending on the RTI framework used, may also be called Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs), Child Study Teams, Early Intervention Teams, etc. These teams meet monthly to review data and plan instruction based on student progress. Because members of the teaching team may be inexperienced with performing the tasks described above, it is very important that the RTI coach facilitate these collaborative meetings. Although an RTI coach is not necessary for successful implementation, the coaching functions are. Sometimes administrators assign these functions across a variety of coordinated staff. The coaching model has proven to be a useful tool in achieving the goals of school and student improvement through RTI (Casey, 2008).

General Education Teacher

It is accepted that to start the implementation process of RTI, general education teachers administer school-wide screening measures across content areas, chart and evaluate students' results, identify students for further monitoring for intervention (via comparing results to cut points), and provide parents with information on student progress once available. Special education teachers may

need to help the general education teachers administer screening and assessment measures as well (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006), as RTI is a general education framework that involves entire school systems as well as surrounding communities. The role of the teacher in an RTI approach is to foster an environment that promotes effective instructional techniques that maximize learning for all students. A good teacher is able to work collaboratively with colleagues when designing and delivering services, and participates in continuing professional development activities (Center for Promoting Research to Practice, n.d.). Further, to ensure fidelity, teachers in both special and general education must collect direct and indirect assessment data (i.e., teacher ratings of students' academic skill); review existing checklists and manuals for RTI implementation in their classroom; implement necessary changes to instructional practices; complete reflections/logs; and keep open lines of communication with coaches, specialists, parents, and principals (Johnson et al., 2006).

School Psychologist

Like coaches and teacher mentors, school psychologists may need to provide assistance and guidance to teachers in using screening data and progress monitoring data to guide decisions about the curriculum. In addition, school psychologists may be relied upon to provide information about available interventions—specifically, to consult with teachers and parents regarding early intervention activities both in the classroom as well as in the home, and to incorporate and analyze available RTI data to guide decisions regarding special education referrals and eligibility for services (Bergeson, 2006). This was the case for some of the schools where CEEP site visits were conducted; one group of school personnel discussed how the school psychologist has been the most helpful individual with RTI training because “[she has] been incredibly supportive to all the teachers in helping and making herself accessible... If it comes from her then it's okay because she's got credibility.”

Jared Moretti, the principal at Wyoming's Big Horn County School District #4, in an RTI Action Network blog, discussed steps in building consensus for successful RTI implementation. He states the hardest part of any change process is building consensus to ensure lasting and positive change. Big Horn County School District #4 serves as an example for successful implementation via consensus building through strong leadership. The first step was forming a leadership/

assessment team that would gather data to assist in increasing students' knowledge and skills. The team members were chosen based on their expertise and key positions within the school, and were viewed as role models among staff in their building. The next step required examination of data; however, not all staff was knowledgeable about the data or comfortable discussing it at first. Time was taken to train staff who were unfamiliar with how to interpret and use the data. Careful planning when constructing the leadership team allowed for experienced and respected staff to be involved. By doing this, the leadership team was able to overcome the obstacle of inexperienced staff by already having the knowledge to teach data interpretation. One dilemma encountered was in the form of teachers taking the data as a personal assault on their teaching ability when students were displaying academic difficulties. Open discussion between the leadership team and teachers about how to utilize the data to determine what instruction and curricula modifications were needed was necessary to help them recognize how advantageous the data was to best assist their students' learning (Moretti, 2008).

FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Family involvement in their child(ren)'s schooling has become an increasing priority across the United States, which is reflected in national initiatives and the literature provided by these initiatives. For example, the RTI Action Network by the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education provide resources and articles about the importance of family involvement. Additionally, legislation in both general and special education, and goals made by educational professional organizations are indicative of the national 'push' for greater family involvement in children's education (Reschly & Christenson, in press, as cited in Reschly, n.d.). Active parent involvement in schools and facilitating ways of supporting learning at home result in different and better outcomes for students. In addition to family involvement, community partnering has been found to be an important component to support student learning (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Strong lines of communication among all stakeholders are necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the tiered instructional model.

According to the statewide RTI survey of Indiana educators administered by CEEP in January 2009, of the 2% of respondents who indicated that their school is in the sustained practice stage of implementation, 16.7% responded that their school has initiated, 50% are in-progress, and 33% have completed regular communications with staff, parents, and the surrounding community. However, it should be noted that from these findings it is difficult to determine the extent to which staff, parents, and the surrounding community are involved in regular communication with the school. Thus, it is important for schools to continue to recognize the importance of communication between all stakeholders and ensure that measures are taken to encourage open lines of communication.

Importance of Community Involvement

Although much of the research on family, school, and community collaboration focuses primarily on the relationship between families and the school (i.e., parent-school collaboration), the community in which the school building is located is of great importance and impacts student learning. Henderson and Mapp (2002) discussed community organizing groups as catalysts in addressing issues of school underfunding and performance in low-income rural and urban areas. These groups are based outside of the schools and are created and led by parents and community members. A major goal for these types of organizing groups is to give parents and residents more power over what happens in schools and in the distribution of resources among schools. What the research has found is that community involvement contributes to upgraded school facilities, improved school leadership and staffing, new and higher-quality programs and resources, and new funding for after-school programs and family supports (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Sanders and Harvey (2000) found through observations, interviews, and focus group sessions that factors that contribute to successful community-school partnerships include the school's commitment to learning, the building and district's administrative support and vision for community partnerships, and the building staff's willingness to engage in respectful and open dialogue with potential community partners about their level and type of involvement. One example of community partnerships comes from the Cleveland Public Schools, where teachers hold

parent-teacher conferences off campus in the community in places that are closer to parents' homes and therefore more convenient. Block parent meetings are also held for families who cannot attend school events due to a lack of transportation. These meetings provide parents school-related information as well as offer an outlet for them to express concerns with the school or their children (Mathews-Johnson, n.d.).

Importance of Parental Involvement

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2005) explains the importance of collaboration between the home and school environments for students, parents, and teachers alike. They state that cross-culturally, when families are involved in students' educations, the benefits reach not only the students, but also the educators, as well as families. Students show more positive attitudes toward learning and school, higher achievement including test scores, improved behavior, increased homework completion, more participation in academic activities, higher rates of school attendance, and fewer placements in special education. Henderson and Mapp (2002) agree and state that family involvement in children's education has been linked to various positive outcomes in areas of academics, emotions, and behaviors. Educators report higher job satisfaction as well as more positive relationships with families. Parents often experience greater self-efficacy, more positive experiences with educators and schools, improved communication with their children, and a better understanding and appreciation for their role in their child(ren)'s education (NASP, 2005). Barton (2007) highlights the importance of developing trust between the home and school. She notes that studies have found that there is a correlation between higher student achievement and higher levels of trust between parents and school staff members, as well as among staff members.

One example of a powerful relationship among family, school, and the community comes from a CEEP site visit for the RTI Implementation Study at Walkerton Elementary. At the school, many activities are organized to promote a positive relationship including a Title I night for families, family field trips, Kindergarten summer school for the lowest achieving students, a summer reading program that rewards children with coupons donated from community busi-

nesses, and coordination with a local church for volunteer student services. The community gives back to the school through donations for low income students including the Pack-a-Backpack program in which community members donate a backpack filled with school supplies for students in need. It is through this reciprocal relationship that the school, family, and community relationship has grown to form a strong union.

Christenson and Carlson (2005) found that across family-school partnerships certain components of intervention stood out, including joint student progress monitoring; interventions focused on specific, measurable outcomes; and interventions that emphasized the role parents play as tutors for students to assist in the learning process. Working collaboratively allows for prevention and early intervention services to be more effective, and is defined as shared accountability, goals and priorities, contributions, and problem-solving strategies. Simply asking families to attend planned activities and meet goals cannot be considered collaboration (see Figure 1).

The three-tier framework of RTI can be used to conceptualize family-school roles and partnerships. With each increasing tier, families and educators communicate more intensely and frequently, achieving greater commitment and contribution (see Figure 1).

The overarching collaborative goal of families and educators in an RTI approach is to increase student competency. At Tier 1, positive relationships should be established among families and educators. Christenson (2003) described the conditions necessary for engaged relationships to include: approach (including shared goals and expectations for involvement), attitudes (similar perceptions about the relationship among families and educators), and atmosphere (including a positive school climate for families and educators). Collaboration and problem-solving efforts among families and educators increase in Tiers 2 and 3. The involvement of families will vary at each tier based on the school personnel and the family's individual strengths and needs (Reschly, n.d.).

Questions and Information for Parents

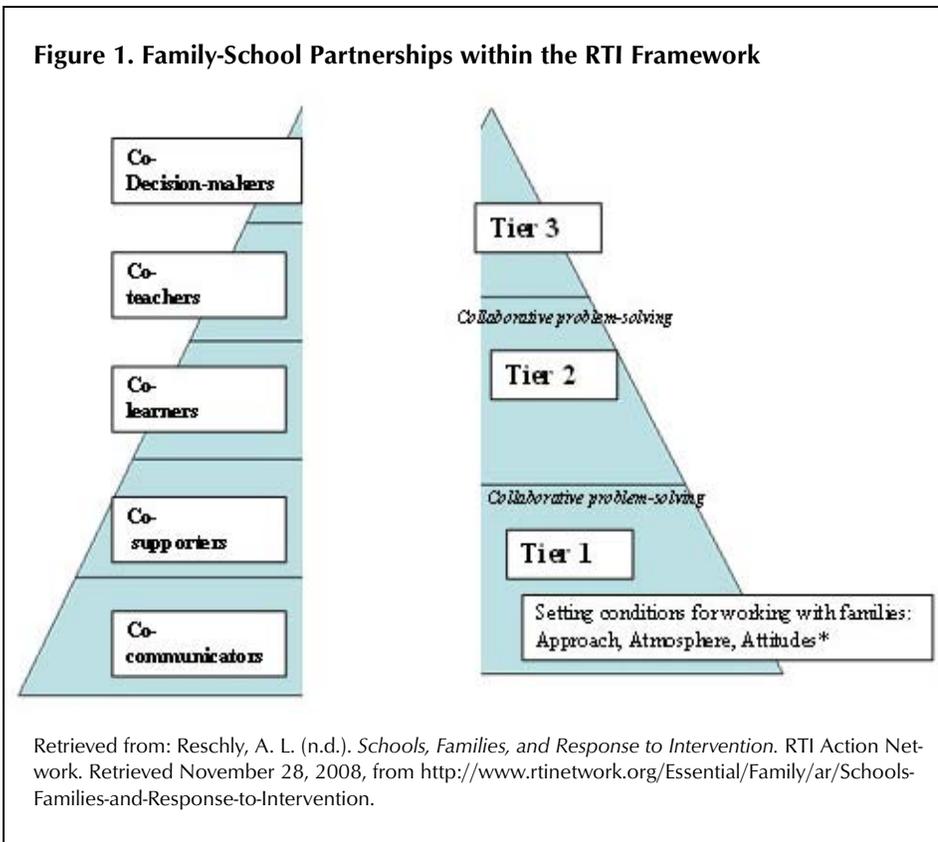
Parental involvement in understanding the RTI framework is important as well. Parents should be informed about how RTI implementation may help their child(ren). Jennings (n.d.) proposes the following notions to be taken into account by parents when their school/district is considering implementing RTI. Parents should become familiar with the academic and behavioral objectives of the cur-

riculum that have been chosen for use in the classroom. The curriculum should be chosen based on how it will meet the needs of all students and if it uses materials that parents will be able to utilize in their homes. Additionally, parents should seek knowledge about whether and how teachers are trained in progress-monitoring tools, which interventions that will be used for academic and behavioral needs are scientifically based, and to what extent these interventions are culturally and linguistically appropriate for their child(ren). As procedures change, the school should have a plan for keeping parents informed and included as partners. This plan should include determining what written materials in the primary language of the family members are available that can be given to parents to help explain the process and changes occurring. Districts should consider school-wide or district-wide meetings to inform parents on the effectiveness of RTI in their school/district, and if additional resources are needed. Klotz and Canter (2006) recommend to parents that "being informed about your school's RTI process is the first step to becoming an active partner."

Parents should know that at any time they may request a full evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services and that they will be notified when student difficulties are first noted. In the same vein, parents should be informed of their child(ren)'s regular, written progress information by the school (NASP, 2006). It is also important to note that to establish a meaningful partnership between families and the school, school personnel should consider the factors that impact whether and how a family member chooses to become involved in partnering with the school (Ferguson, 2005). Some factors to consider include the family member's definition of the educational role (i.e., what role does the family member see as important and relevant?), their beliefs about appropriate ways for child rearing, their feelings about their ability (based on skills and knowledge level) to help and teach children, and their feelings of being welcomed by the school. These are topics that should be discussed with family members to guide schools in fostering greater family-school partnerships (Ferguson, 2005).

Types of Parental Involvement: Epstein's Framework

Epstein's framework can be used to help understand and develop the relationship between the school, family, and community. The six types of involvement to create part-



nerships include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The term “parenting” means assisting families in establishing positive and healthy home environments to support children’s growth as students. As students become aware of parental involvement and how important education is to that family, a balance can be achieved between school and home. Families are provided the opportunity to learn more about how home conditions influence the school environment, and awareness is created regarding how other parents are faced with similar challenges. Similarly, schools are provided the opportunity to better understand families’ goals and concerns for their children, as well as to build respect for families’ strengths and efforts.

Communicating is designing effective communications between the school and home about programs going on at the school and the child’s progress. Students and parents alike are made aware of progress and are able to see the actions necessary to improve or maintain the child’s grades. Parents are able to more easily and effectively interact with schools and teachers because there is open communication about the child’s progress.

Volunteering is the improvement of recruiting and organizing methods by involving families to support students and school programs. Volunteering schedules and events should be made flexible and open to all families to show how their time and efforts are appreciated. In addition to gaining respect and understanding between parents and teachers about the demands in a school classroom, volunteering allows for greater individual student attention.

Learning at home is based on providing families the knowledge about how to help students with the curriculum and homework. Parents are able to give students an opportunity outside the classroom to make connections between homework and what is being discussed in the classroom, thereby increasing comprehension and homework completion rates. Parents are able to discuss class work and homework with their child because of a deeper understanding of how and what the child is learning.

Decision making is including parents in making school decisions via school councils, committees, and other organizations. Parents are able to give valuable input that can benefit students. Parents are given a sense of ownership in the school and an awareness of school policy and students’ rights are gained. Lastly,

through collaboration with the community, resources and services are integrated for the family, student, and school to strengthen programs, practices, and learning as a whole (Epstein, n.d.).

The following tips from the RTI Action Network were offered as ways for school staff to keep parents interested and involved. When a parent is dropping off or picking up his or her child, educators can use this opportunity to discuss specific information about any recent progress their child has made socially, emotionally, or academically. Another tip is for educators to coordinate activities such as informal breakfasts, discussion groups, or class trips asking not only parental consent, but encouraging parent involvement in the development and planning of these events. Teachers and staff should try to frequently contact and update parents through conferences, printed materials, or even online. When conversing with parents, school staff can ask for feedback on things that can be improved in both the content and format of events, activities, and communication. Lastly, creating and promoting the use of a parent contact list is another way of increasing communication among parents, teachers, and other relevant school personnel (RTI Action Network, n.d.). Thus, a lot more than simply informing parents about their children’s schooling practices and their progress goes into promoting family involvement.

Boethel (2003) recommends that schools engage in specific strategies that are often found across programs that address student and family needs related to diversity. These common strategies include welcoming family members to the school (i.e., having staff distribute pamphlets in the community regarding school events and meetings), meeting families “on their turf” (i.e., meet-and-greet walks in the neighborhoods, special meetings at a local community center, church, or library) to discuss pertinent issues, continuing interactions between staff and parents regularly, utilizing all modes of communication (i.e., local radio announcements, letters/written announcements in home languages of the students, ride sharing, etc.), avoiding over-use of select groups of volunteers (i.e., by asking volunteers to bring a friend, conducting focus groups with various groups of family members, community members, staff, and students), and taking time to talk with parents about their opinions and understandings about student learning.

CULTURAL RESPONSIVITY

What is a Culturally Responsive Educational System?

It is important to keep in mind that effective parent-school collaboration is needed to support students from diverse populations. NASP (2005) notes that “families come in many shapes and sizes with multiple perspectives, expectations, and communication styles.” Schools need to provide education to staff and families that encourages understanding and celebration of diverse family forms, cultures, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Seeing diversity as a strength that provides multiple perspectives and information about a child becomes valued. For example, the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii found that when the discourse of reading lessons was allowed to become more like the style of colloquial, everyday Hawaiian conversation (i.e., more culturally responsive), reading achievement improved dramatically (Klingner et al., 2005). When school personnel and families make the effort to understand and educate each other, they often find more similarities than differences. Collaboration is based on the assumption that families, children, and educators are doing the best they can; efforts are made to understand others’ behavior and intentions rather than judge them as right or wrong.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST) highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in instruction, stating that culturally responsive instruction “bridges the gap between the school and the world of the student” and takes into consideration the values that students bring in from their culture that are aimed at assuring learning in the academic setting (Callins, 2006).

Disproportionality in the Educational System

When we talk about disproportionality in education, we are stating that although students from different groups (i.e., ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, language, etc.) should be, for example, identified for special education services in similar proportions, we are finding that there is over- or underrepresentation of

groups in such settings as special education (Hosp, 2008). In other words, disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a particular population/demographic group in a specific area (i.e., special education programs), relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population (National Association for Bilingual Education, 2002). This is indeed an issue because of the stigma associated with special education, and because there is evidence to suggest that the processes in which students are identified for services are biased. Some have argued that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs when using the discrepancy formula (Batsche et al., 2007), which was discussed in the first Special Report as being the discrepancy between IQ and achievement scores.

... disproportionality found in special education exists for linguistically as well as ethnically diverse students

Furthermore, there are inconsistent processes between states for determining eligibility for special education services due to the lack of an operational definition in the federal regulation (i.e., how severe should a “severe discrepancy” between academic achievement and intellectual ability be?) (Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). In addition, a review of the literature across a 20-year span indicates that the disproportionality found in special education exists for linguistically as well as ethnically diverse students (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). However, one study that used an RTI/Problem Solving Model in the Minneapolis Public Schools found that by using a Problem Solving Model, there was a positive impact on the disproportion of African American students in special education over a four-year period, from 1997 to 2001 (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). Therefore, there is hope that RTI may be a way in which issues of disproportionality of minority students in special education can be addressed. Hosp (2008) agrees and states that RTI’s focus on improving student outcomes for all, its goal of using tiered service delivery to meet the needs of each student, and its systematic data collection and monitoring efforts will provide ways to combat disproportionality.

Does RTI also hold some promise for culturally and linguistically diverse students? Although there is evidence to suggest that RTI is an effective approach in providing students with interventions, less is known about how RTI affects English Language Learners (ELLs), who are students who speak a language other than English and are in the process of learning English (i.e., not students who are fluent in English as well as in their native language). These students may be placed in various programs, such as bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL), to support their learning. Within these programs, there are different models that use varying degrees of support. For example, students may have adequate literacy and knowledge skills in their first language, but lack those same skills in their second language inhibiting language acquisition. These students need help in applying the skills they already have to learn English literacy. Others may struggle with learning a second language because they were never adequately instructed to learn the skills necessary to be proficient in their first language. An even smaller number of students may have been given adequate instruction in their first language, but still continue to struggle with their first and second language acquisition (Vaughn, n.d.). When implementing RTI with ELL students, it is necessary to understand what type of support program students are enrolled in, how their native language and English proficiency is assessed and monitored, as well as the core literacy program they receive in their native language and/or English (Vaughn & Ortiz, 2008).

Recommendations for Ensuring Cultural Responsivity

With teachers serving as the primary resource that students encounter in school, how teachers conduct their classrooms is integral in ensuring cultural responsivity. Callins (2006) provides nine characteristics that culturally responsive teachers possess that influence the classroom environment. These characteristics are: 1) communicate high expectations, 2) use active teaching methods, 3) facilitate learning, 4) have positive perspectives on parents/families of culturally and linguistically diverse students, 5) demonstrate cultural sensitivity, 6) reshape the curriculum, 7) provide culturally-mediated instruction, 8) promote student-controlled classroom discourse, and 9) include small group instruction and cooperative learning.

With regard to the first characteristic, the whole school community needs to convey the message to their students that all students are capable of success and should be respected. Another characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is that they incorporate into their instruction ways in which students are constantly engaged and play active roles in developing curriculum and learning activities. A third characteristic is that teachers not only act as instructors, but also as guides, mediators, and consultants to their students. A fourth characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is that they encourage and maintain open lines of communication between themselves, their students, students’ families, and the community on important issues.

Another trait of culturally responsive teachers is that they have an awareness of the various cultures represented in their classrooms and incorporate this knowledge into classroom instruction and curriculum. Because becoming culturally responsive is “a developmental process” that includes not only conversing about race and equity and being aware of other cultures but also reflecting on one’s own culture and beliefs (Ritter, 2008), teachers should also reflect on their own culture and how it intersects with others’ cultures. A sixth characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is that they are flexible with modifying the curriculum to make it responsive to students’ interests and backgrounds. Another characteristic of these teachers is that they provide instruction to students using culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally-valued knowledge in the curriculum. Teachers should provide students opportunities to “take charge” of some part of the lesson, which allows teachers to experience the ways that speech and negotiation are used in students’ homes and communities. Lastly, teachers promote cultural responsivity by allowing cooperative learning to occur in small student-led group discussions.

The following are suggestions for incorporating cultural responsivity in schools. Peer mediation can allow students from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to talk about issues of diversity. Group interventions can be used for some culturally diverse students. Students learn to rely on their peer supports and are better able to communicate in this context especially if coming from cultures that value the group above the individual. If possible, schools can hire parent liaisons to work with families that would traditionally not have involvement with the school. Telephone trees can be conducted in multiple lan-

guages to ensure that all parents receive important information regarding their child and the school. Lastly, minority parent committees can be organized to facilitate minority family participation, as well as to provide information on college prep classes, grants, and scholarship opportunities for minority students (Mathews-Johnson, n.d.).

To address cultural responsiveness in language arts and literary instruction, Callins (2006) suggests the use of multiethnic literature as part of a literature-based reading program in classrooms. The use of multiethnic literature may help to affirm and develop students' cultural identity as well as their understanding and appreciation of other cultures. Furthermore, the National Education Association (NEA, 2006) provides tips for teachers to become more culturally responsive. Namely, the NEA suggests that teachers: allow their students to talk about their culture in the classroom, complete neighborhood walk-throughs in a respectful manner, incorporate students' experiences into the lessons (for example, using local bus route maps to build lessons around map reading), and, lastly, utilize culturally responsive lessons that are already available and adapt them to address different cultures and grades in their classes.

Moving Towards a More Culturally Responsive RTI Framework

How should cultural responsiveness be addressed and maintained in an RTI framework? Klinger and Edwards (2006) emphasize the fact that an important characteristic of any RTI approach is for instructional practices and interventions at every tier to be evidence-based about what works; however, it is necessary to determine "what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts" (pg.108). Therefore, they suggest children should receive appropriate and culturally responsive instruction that is based on evidence that is validated with students who have similar characteristics as they do. The authors suggest that teachers should familiarize themselves with the instructional strategies correlated with academic growth for their population of students. The researchers state that "the success of the RTI process for culturally and linguistically diverse students depends on educators having access to appropriate evidence-based instructional approaches that have been validated with diverse populations" (pg. 113). Therefore, it is evident that teachers must be knowledgeable about and practice evidence-based

instructional approaches catered to their classroom population. Further, teachers should familiarize themselves with assessment procedures to monitor their students' progress. The Teacher Assistance Team or a Child Study Team that a student may be referred to when receiving intensive supports at Tier 2 and above should consist of diverse members with expert knowledge in culturally responsive practices in teaching. These teams should also include a member who can provide guidance with ongoing and culturally sensitive assessment procedures. When students are English Language Learners, the team should also include a bilingual or ESL specialist. The team should use a problem-solving approach to determine how to change and continue tweaking the supports a student has been receiving and create instructional objectives for each student based on his/her performance data. Further, continual student observations should be made both within and outside of the classroom.

In addition to the culturally responsive framework with regard to academics, the framework may also be applied to behavior. A culturally responsive behavioral RTI framework acknowledges the cultural and linguistic differences of students. Students must find connections among themselves and with the behavioral goals they are asked to perform. It is important to remember that the decision to refer some students for behavioral problems is based on teacher observations. Sometimes observations and judgments are based on personal views and biases without considering the social and cultural contexts of the student or situation. The core teacher belief essential for any culturally responsive Positive Behavior Support (PBS)¹ framework is that all children want to learn and improve behavior, but at times these students may need additional help due to different cultural norms. Cultural and social differences are not to be considered deficits from which to start interventions, but as a determinant in creating effective solutions (Orosco, n.d.).

When implementing RTI with ELLs, Vaughn and Ortiz (2008) recommend including ongoing professional development (that provides information regarding the development of oral language, early literacy, students' home language, contextual considerations, and the cultural background of students) for teachers (especially those in ESL and bilingual education programs) and other school personnel. Further, as acknowledged in Klinger and Edwards' 2006 research, it is recommended that a problem-solving team be developed,

with members who have experience with and knowledge about working with ELLs.

Within a tiered RTI approach, specifically in universal screening and Tier 1, ELLs can be screened using the same early reading indicators as native English language speakers (in areas such as letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and word/text reading). However, screening measures in either/both students' native language and English must be highly reliable and valid, and take into consideration the proficiency level of students in both their first language/native language and in English. The same strategies used with English speaking students are useful for ELL students, including repetition, rapid pacing, frequent practice and discussion, modeling, and methodical and clear instruction. Further, consider the core instructional program for ELLs for both oral language and literacy instruction in their native and/or English language: Are practices that are associated with improved reading outcomes for students in the core curriculum in place for these students? At the second tier, ELLs should be provided with intensive interventions in small groups (as early as Grade 1) as soon as they are recognized as needing Tier 2 services. It is vital that teachers hold high (but reasonable) instructional expectations of ELLs, and do not delay instruction until ELLs' English speaking skills are mastered; rather, teachers and other school personnel should support students' learning while promoting English language development.

At Tier 3, ELLs require more intensive and extensive services provided by a well-trained professional (i.e., bilingual educator or ESL teacher who has gone through extensive training) who will take into consideration the cultural and contextual factors of the student (i.e., home life, personal and classroom factors). When determining effective interventions with ELL students, factors such as attention, language, behavior problems, and vocabulary need to be considered when students are not responding to research-based interventions that are typically associated with improved outcomes. In working with ELLs, Sáenz (2008) states that curriculum-based measurement (CBM)² can be useful with this population because it can help to determine when it is necessary for teachers to adjust the instruction for all ELLs including those that are struggling. In addition, school leaders can use the data to figure out which teachers may need more assistance in teaching their ELLs. However, limitations of using CBM include the fact that there are not many studies on CBMs for ELLs, as well as the

scores being dependent on the background of ELLs' native language (i.e., how developed is their native language and how similar is it to the English language?) It should be noted that when considering ELLs for special education, teams must take into account whether students' low academic outcomes can be attributed to limited English proficiency, culture, economy, or other disadvantages. In addition, Sáenz suggests that RTI should only be one component of a more comprehensive evaluation of ELLs, especially given that there are confounding factors that may contribute to the rate of growth of ELLs (i.e., the instructional program in which they are placed).

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy has utilized various techniques to gather information regarding the degree to which school districts/schools have implemented RTI, to assess the degree to which participating districts/schools have successfully implemented RTI so that improved student outcomes can be realized, and to begin to determine the effects on academic and behavioral outcomes for participating students. These techniques included a statewide survey on RTI implementation, site visits with school personnel, and a three-part Special Report series on Indiana's six core components of RTI, with the current report being the last in the series regarding the last three components of the IDOE's framework for RTI.

The purpose of the statewide survey was to gauge the level of awareness and understanding of the RTI framework among individuals holding a variety of educational positions including superintendents, teachers, and school counselors. Additional information gathered from the survey includes the level and degree of school corporations' implementation of RTI and corresponding training, and feedback from educators about the role of the IDOE in providing technical assistance to support school corporations in the exploration, implementation, and sustained practice of the RTI framework. General findings that emerged from the survey were that the majority of schools are implementing RTI across the state; however, the degree to which they have implemented RTI varies and a vast majority of schools were in the exploration and conceptualization or initial implementation levels of RTI. In addition, the survey results reflected that most school personnel viewed the role of the IDOE as a resource to

provide information and consultation, as well as professional development opportunities. However, respondents also shared that they have not received adequate information and guidance from the IDOE, nor do they want the IDOE to regulate the use of their RTI framework.

The purposes of the 12 site visits to both RTI Academy and non-RTI Academy schools were to examine how and to what extent the core components of RTI were being implemented in classrooms/schools, to identify implementation barriers and resources necessary for successful implementation, and to determine the universal screening tools and research-based interventions that schools were utilizing. The visits supported the survey finding that most schools are implementing RTI but to varying degrees. Additionally, there were differences among elementary, middle, and high schools: elementary school challenges focused primarily on academics, whereas high schools were mainly concerned about behavior management. Middle schools had a unique challenge of finding materials that are content-appropriate (i.e., materials students are interested in) as well as grade-level appropriate (i.e., materials at the students' instructional level). The statistical analysis and summary findings from the statewide survey and the RTI Implementation site visits are available at the CEEP website at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/projects/project.php?id=1027&category=1>.

As schools progress in their RTI implementation, more information needs to be gathered regarding how RTI impacts not only students' academic achievement including universal screening and progress-monitoring data, student proficiency in mathematics and English/Language Arts on ISTEP+, and graduation rates, but also their behavioral outcomes including discipline referrals, attendance records, and dropout rates, particularly those of at-risk students and students with disabilities. In addition, information regarding the frequency of student psychological evaluations and patterns of special education placement is necessary.

END NOTES

1. For more information regarding Positive Behavior Support, please see the Education Policy Brief, *Improving School Climate and Student Behavior: A New Paradigm for Indiana Schools*, as well as the first Special Report in this series on RTI issued by the

Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, *Indiana's Vision of Response to Intervention*.

2. For more information regarding curriculum-based measurement, please see the second Special Report issued by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy on RTI, *The Core Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Evidence-based Core Curriculum, Assessment and Progress Monitoring, and Data-based Decision Making*.

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WEB RESOURCES

IDOE Office of State Leadership Development

<http://www.doe.in.gov/ipla/welcome.html>

NASP: New Roles in RTI

<http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/New%20Roles%20in%20RTI.pdf>

NASP: RTI- A Primer for Parents

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/rtiprimer.aspx>

NASP: Home-School Collaboration

http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/pospaper_hsc.aspx

RTI Action Network: Family Involvement

<http://www.rtinetwork.org/Essential/Family>

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)

<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/>

RTI Action Network: Diversity and Disproportionality

<http://www.rtinetwork.org/Learn/Diversity>

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC): Teaching Culturally Diverse Students

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e584.html>

National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems

<http://www.nccrest.org>

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: School-Family-Community Connections

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/>

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