

*Teacher Perceptions of Response to Intervention Implementation  
in Light of IDEA Goals*

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*Abstract*

Traditionally, school systems have identified students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) by a measured gap between achievement and ability in a specific area. Recent amendments to the IDEA allowed for the use of alternative methods of identifying students with a SLD. Some states have responded by using Response to Intervention (RTI). This new method represents a radical change in identification of SLD students. Consequently, policy makers need to know if RTI, as it is actually implemented, is serving the goals of the IDEA. Attempting to provide information on this subject, the authors conducted a modified Delphi study in a school system that requires RTI as the method of SLD identification. They analyzed the resultant data in light of the identified goals of IDEA. This article describes the research process employed, provides the aforementioned analysis, and draws conclusions and makes some initial recommendations for further research in this area.

*Introduction*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. § 1401, *et seq*) requires, among many things, that school systems identify and provide special education services to students with a qualifying “specific learning disability” (SLD). (§ 1401(3)(a)(i)(ii)) Recent amendments to the IDEA allowed for a change in the way such students are identified by school systems. Prior to the amendments school systems relied on a measured gap between achievement and ability to identify students with SLDs. The new law allowed for the use of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model to identify these students. The adoption of the RTI model amounts to a sea change in the identification process of SLD students. Consequently, policy makers, school administrators, and teachers need to know if the RTI model is serving the goals of IDEA.

In an attempt to answer this question the researchers reviewed the literature concerning the development of special education in the United States for the purpose of identifying the goals of the IDEA and specifically, the SLD category. The researchers then conducted a modified Delphi study of RTI implementation in a school system. Through the Delphi method, expert opinion and experience data were gathered from classroom teachers responsible for implementing the RTI process. The researchers then analyzed these data in light of the goals of the IDEA in an attempt to determine whether the RTI process, as it is actually implemented, serves the purpose of

appropriate identification and provision of services to students with specific learning disabilities. In this article, the researchers describe this process, and provide the analysis of the resultant data and their conclusions. Finally, the authors provide recommendations for future research in this increasingly important area.

### *A Brief History of Students with Disabilities*

#### **Appeal for services**

Compared to modern times, early systems of education in the British colonies that would become the United States were narrowly focused. From the colonial era into the early 1800s, two basic purposes existed for most formal schooling; either to teach students to read, write and do arithmetic sufficiently to manage their lives in a heavily religious, agrarian society, (Mass. The Old Deluder Act, 1647) or to prepare children of influential families to enter the professions such as law, medicine, the clergy, or politics. (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, p.138) Given that the explosion of technology flowing from the industrial revolution was yet to come, the number and complexity of occupational options were relatively small. The notion of preparing any but the privileged few for the professions was anathema to the gentry, and an education dichotomy existed that perpetuated the existing class structure. (Cooper, et al., p.138) An exception to this attitudinal rule was Thomas Jefferson, whose Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge (VA 1778, et seq.) proposed that the public pay for capable students to be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance<sup>1</sup> (Preamble to the bill). Despite common goals, and the occasional outlier like Jefferson, however, the near-total local community control of education led to a “wide open” diversity of schooling methods in the colonies. (Cooper, et al., p.139)

Following a diversity of schooling methods during the colonial period, whose only element that was almost universally shared was a focus on religion, schools gradually became more standardized from the 1800s to the modern era. Coinciding with a trend away from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, publicly funded education in the United States gained significant momentum in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As they were during the colonial period, schools were designed to educate students to a level at which they could function in society. Further, the impact of the industrial revolution on U.S. American society implicitly had an influence on both the goals and the methodology of public education systems. (Gorton, et al., p.26) Students were educated largely with the intent of preparing the masses to work in factories, and the schools themselves were often modeled along the principles of a factory. Such a model made little provision for differences in abilities, aptitudes or interests among students. Instead, in the nature of a factory, the philosophy of factory model education seemed to presume consistent inputs in terms of student raw materials. Combined with consistent treatment in terms of curriculum and instructional methods, a relatively consistent output in terms of student achievement was expected. (Katz, 2010, Problems with Standards section, ¶ 2) While such expectations were the predictable basis of factory model education, it is also predictable that such a system would

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, however forcefully Jefferson sometimes argued against the institution of slavery, it is unlikely he anticipated that his proposed Bill would apply to any but free children.

allow little to no room for variance in student input. Exceptional students, particularly those who would be identified as students with disabilities in modern America, were often marginalized in school, or categorically excluded from attending. (B.O.E. v. Rowley, 1982, p. 179) Consequently, untold human potential was denied the opportunity to develop through formal, publicly funded educational processes.

### **Development of Special Education in Response**

As of mid-twentieth century, public education had been, more or less, centralized at the state level. State legislatures and education departments developed policies, which were then implemented through local school boards, typically at the county or city level. Education was almost entirely a function of the several states and neither the administrative branch of the federal government, nor federal constitutional or statutory law had much bearing on it. But with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a new era of federal intervention in public schools arose. Subsequent to *Brown*, "advocates for individuals with disabilities championed desegregated education for children with disabilities." (Dayton, 2008, p.331) Arguing that individuals with disabilities were being denied equal protection of the laws and due process rights under the federal constitution, plaintiffs began to win judgments mandating educational opportunity for such students. (*PARC v. Pennsylvania*, (E.D. Pa. 1972); *Mills v. B.O.E.* (D.C. 1972)) In contrast to the exclusivity and uniformity of the factory model of education and its underlying assumptions, courts began to recognize a legal responsibility to provide educational opportunity to all students.

In addition to federal judicial intervention, the legislative branch of the federal government also became involved in public education post-*Brown*. In 1970, in response to minimal or even nonexistent educational opportunities previously available to persons with disabilities, the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Act (Dayton, 2008, p.332). In 1975, Congress reauthorized and greatly expanded the statute under a new title, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Public Law 94-142). Under the provisions of the statute, codified at 20 U.S.C. § 1401 *et seq.*, states receive federal money to be used to help educate children with specified disabilities. In exchange for the federal funding, states must agree to the "extensive goals and procedures" (B.O.E. v. Rowley, p. 179) of the statute. The stated intent of the IDEA was to ensure that "handicapped children [were granted] the right to a free appropriate public education." (20 U.S.C. § 1412(1)) Further, the statute requires that eligible children be educated with non-disabled peers "to the maximum extent appropriate." (20 U.S.C. § 1412(5)(a)) Concerning eligibility, § 1401(3)(a)(i)(ii) of the statute defines a "child with a disability" as one: with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

Additionally, the statute places an affirmative duty, known as the "child find" (34 CFR §300.111) provisions, on recipient school systems to identify students who qualify for services under the statute. (20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3)(A)) Once a student is identified as having a qualifying disability, the school is responsible for designing and implementing an appropriate educational

program for the student. Section 1412 (a)(4) of the statute formalizes this requirement, and uses the term “Individualized Education Program” (IEP) to describe the plan.

While listing the qualifying categories of disabilities, IDEA does not provide specific descriptions of the categories. Instead, that decision is left up to the states to determine. For example, under § 1401 “specific learning disability” is identified as a category under which a student may qualify for services under IDEA. But neither the statute nor the implementing regulations instruct states on what constitutes a specific learning disability, or how that determination should be made. Consequently, individual states use varying definitions of specific learning disability. Despite differing standards, however, it can generally be said that until recently state definitions of the disability have emphasized a discrepancy between ability and achievement (Christ, Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009). Under this standard, a student whose academic performance as measured by standardized achievement tests was significantly below what that student’s I.Q. scores would predict was identified as having a specific learning disability.

Based on the discrepancy model of identifying students with specific learning disabilities, school systems have provided special education services to many students over the last three decades. But this model was not without its critics who cited, among other things, inadequacy of testing used, lack of consistent interpretation by teams, time to complete the process and lack of legal strength (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2007; Zirkel 2009). Researchers and politicians also argued that the discrepancy model was a system that waited for students to fail, instead of providing early intervention to minimize students falling behind (President’s Commission on Special Education, 2002.) In 2001 a learning disabilities summit was called by the Office of Special Education to examine how the specific learning disability category was diagnosed (Christ, Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005).

In response to criticisms of SLD identification, Congress allowed for a new identification method in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA. Zirkel (2009) found that the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 changed “the interpretive standards for the definition of “disability”” (p.52) as they apply to student in K-12 schools. Specifically, the 2004 reauthorization advocates the use of a problem solving model for early intervention and identification of students who are suspected of having a specific learning disability. Fuchs and Young (2006) note “the newly reauthorized law neither encourages nor discourages the continued use of IQ-achievement discrepancy but allows practitioners for the first time to use an alternate: RTI” (p. 9). “Response to intervention [RTI] integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems.” (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2007)

### **Identified Goals of IDEA**

The IDEA legislation itself, along with case law interpreting the statute and scholarly commentary on the topic, indicate the following themes of the theoretical grounding of IDEA and the resultant goals of the statute: 1) the IDEA was enacted by Congress to provide educational opportunity to students who did not fit the mold of normality in public schools; “students with disabilities” in the language of the statute 2) school systems have a duty under

the statute to identify students eligible for services, and to identify which statutory category of the disability such students have 3) once identified, the student has a right to an individually tailored program of education designed to provide for the unique needs of that student; an “appropriate” education in the statutory language.

Considering the legislative mandate to identify students who qualify for services under IDEA, and to provide appropriate services for them, the effectiveness of the RTI process at meeting these goals is crucial. In this study the authors seek to determine whether RTI, as it is actually implemented by the population studied, is consistent with the intent of the IDEA, and whether it serves the goals and requirements of the statute. In an attempt to answer these questions the researchers collected expert opinion and experience data from classroom teachers responsible for implementing RTI, and analyzed the data in light of the goals of IDEA.

### *Methodology*

This study employed a modified version of the Delphi method to seek consensus of professional opinion on the RTI model among those responsible for its implementation at the classroom level—teachers in regular education classrooms. The authors gathered data over two rounds. The population for the study consisted of regular education teachers responsible for implementing the RTI process, working in a state that was one of the first to mandate RTI as the model of identification for Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). The Delphi method was selected because the understanding of this topic will be enhanced through collection of expert opinion and experience data. Furthermore, this topic is somewhat controversial and anonymity within a group discussion allows an open and honest dialogue without fear of reprisal (Downar and Howryluck, (2010), Murry and Hammons, (1995)).

The final Round 1 sample was 20 classroom teachers from one district in a southern state. Initially, 22 teachers responded. After reviewing the data, it was clear that two of the respondents were special education teachers, and therefore did not meet the criteria for participation. Consequently, their responses were not included in the analysis.

In the version of Delphi used in this study, the researchers planned and prepared participants for the possibility of three rounds. The first round was a brainstorming round based on a series of prompts. Panelists contributed to the brainstorming session by responding to the open-ended prompts. After the first round, the researchers coded and categorized the qualitative data and created a list of statements derived from the data. The statements were the basis for a structured questionnaire using a five point Likert scale. In the second round, the questionnaire was administered to the panelists.

Responses to the second round were challenging to obtain. The researchers sent three reminders and requests for continued participation and ultimately received 13 responses to the Round 2 survey. Respecting the fact that participation was voluntary, the researchers made the decision to conclude the study at the close of the second round. At this point, the researchers studied the data to determine the level of consensus on each of the statements. There is no universal agreement in the literature on the level at which consensus should be set. Suggestions range from a simple majority of 51% to 80% (Hasson, Kenney, & McKenna, 2000). In the instant study the authors

defined consensus as at least 75% of panelists strongly agreeing or agreeing, or disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with a statement. Logic suggests that there be an inverse relationship between panel size and consensus threshold percentage. Those statements on which there was consensus are reported as such in the findings section.

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the purposes of RTI and about its actual implementation. The researchers analyzed the resulting data to determine the extent to which classroom teachers’ perceptions of the RTI process, as implemented, matches the goals and requirements of IDEA concerning students with specific learning disabilities.

### **Results**

In this section, the statements that resulted from the open-ended Round 1 prompts are listed along with the results from the Round 2 survey. Following the presentation of the results, there is a discussion of those results within the context of the literature.

There were six Round 1 open-ended prompts. Teachers’ narrative responses to these prompts were open-coded and axial coded (Strauss, 1987). That is, the responses were coded inductively by creating brief statements that represented the meaning of the response; then they were grouped with like responses and reworded to be inclusive of each aspect of each similar response. Every effort was made to maintain verbatim segments in each statement so the meaning of the response was not altered by the analysis.

#### **Teachers’ Understanding of the Purpose of RTI**

The prompt to which teachers responded in this section was “Describe your understanding of the purpose of Response to Intervention (RTI).” The result of the coding process was 10 distinct declarative statements. The statements are listed in Table 1; those with 75% or greater consensus are indicated by bold italics.

Table 1

*Statements generated from: Describe your understanding of the purpose of Response to Intervention (RTI)*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<b><i>RTI can be used to address academic issues.</i></b>	<b><i>46%</i></b>	<b><i>31%</i></b>	<b><i>8%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI can be used to address behavioral issues.</i></b>	<b><i>38%</i></b>	<b><i>31%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI provides extra support for struggling students.</i></b>	<b><i>46%</i></b>	<b><i>23%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI addresses reading and mathematics issues exclusively.</i></b>	<b><i>15%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>	<b><i>38%</i></b>	<b><i>38%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI should be the collective effort of teachers.</i></b>	<b><i>54%</i></b>	<b><i>23%</i></b>	<b><i>8%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI is for identifying disabilities.</i></b>	<b><i>15%</i></b>	<b><i>15%</i></b>	<b><i>23%</i></b>	<b><i>8%</i></b>
<b><i>RTI is for providing and modifying interventions.</i></b>	<b><i>15%</i></b>	<b><i>62%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>	<b><i>0%</i></b>

<i>RTI gives all students the opportunity for success.</i>	<b>23%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<i>RTI is a tiered system.</i>	<b>54%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<i>RTI ensures high quality instruction.</i>	<b>0%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>0%</b>

### Teachers' Experiences Working with Students in Tier 1

The prompt to which teachers responded was “Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students for whom Tier 1 interventions were determined to be appropriate and sufficient modifications.” The result of the coding process was 11 distinct declarative statements, eight of which had 75% or greater consensus. The statements are listed in Table 2. The statements with 75% or greater consensus are in bold italics.

Table 2

*Statements generated from: Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students for whom Tier 1 interventions were determined to be appropriate and sufficient modifications.*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<b><i>Tier 1 is the instruction all students get in class.</i></b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Tier 1 instruction is differentiated.</i></b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Tier 1 students can be successful in a regular classroom.</i></b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Tier 1 includes formal and informal assessments.</i></b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Small group instruction is used to differentiate ability levels in Tier 1.</i></b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Tier 1 documentation is manageable.</i></b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>My students respond well to Tier 1 interventions.</i></b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Students' lack of effort leads to the need for Tier 1 intervention.</i></b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b><i>Working with Tier 1 students is a normal part of teaching.</i></b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>Most students are at Tier 1.</i></b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b><i>I have no experience with Tier 1 students.</i></b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>69%</b>

### Teachers' Experiences Working with Tier 2 Students

The prompt to which teachers responded was “Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students for whom Tier 2 interventions were determined to be appropriate and sufficient modifications.” Sixteen unique statements were generated from this

prompt and are listed in Table 3; three of which received 75% or greater consensus as indicated by bold italics.

Table 3

*Statements generated from: Describe your experience identifying, documenting and working with students for whom Tier 2 interventions were determined to be appropriate and sufficient modifications.*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<i>Not difficult to work with Tier 2 students if the right accommodation is implemented early.</i>	16%	62%	15%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students struggle with academics.</i>	0%	62%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students struggle with behavior.</i>	0%	31%	23%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students need extra help to catch up with peers.</i>	8%	62%	0%	8%
<i>Tier 2 students need small group instruction to be successful.</i>	15%	23%	23%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students need one-on-one instruction to be successful.</i>	8%	23%	23%	8%
<i>Tier 2 students can return to Tier 1 with interventions/modifications.</i>	15%	62%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students need extra time to be successful.</i>	0%	62%	8%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students need prompting to be successful.</i>	0%	62%	15%	0%
<i>Work with Tier 2 students takes extra time.</i>	8%	62%	0%	0%
<i>Gaps in Tier 2 student learning can be attributed to our curriculum.</i>	8%	23%	38%	8%
<i>Tier 2 students should be pulled out of class for instruction if necessary.</i>	8%	15%	15%	8%
<i>Tier 2 students can benefit from in school suspension in extreme cases.</i>	15%	15%	31%	23%
<i>Students who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions are moved to Tier 3.</i>	38%	38%	0%	0%
<i>Weekly progress monitoring should be used to identify Tier 2 students.</i>	8%	46%	23%	0%
<i>Tier 2 students have adopted an attitude of learned helplessness.</i>	31%	15%	15%	8%

### Teachers' Experiences Working with Tier 3 Students

The prompt to which teachers responded was "Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students for whom Tier 3 interventions were determined to be

appropriate and sufficient modifications.” Responses to this prompt produced the 17 unique statements listed in Table 4. Of these unique statements there was 75% or greater consensus on seven.

Table 4

*Statements with 75% or Greater Agreement on: Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students for whom Tier 3 interventions were determined to be appropriate and sufficient modifications.*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<i>Documentation requirements at Tier 3 are challenging.</i>	23%	62%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 3 students struggle after the Tier 2 intervention.</i>	31%	54%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 3 interventions are more intensive than Tier 2 interventions.</i>	46%	38%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 3 students are monitored by the grade level Student Support Team.</i>	8%	46%	6%	8%
<i>Learning gaps have hampered the progress of Tier 3 students.</i>	31%	38%	0%	0%
<i>The Tier 3 process is inundated with paperwork and puts needs of students on hold.</i>	31%	15%	15%	0%
<i>The students in Tier 3 are very far behind their peers.</i>	15%	23%	23%	0%
<i>Remediation for Tier 3 students focuses on critical areas.</i>	23%	62%	0%	0%
<i>The Tier 3 step requires Student Support Team Paperwork.</i>	8%	46%	8%	8%
<i>Tier 3 includes one-on-one interventions.</i>	31%	46%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 3 includes small group interventions.</i>	31%	46%	0%	0%
<i>Tier 3 includes extended time for interventions.</i>	38%	46%	0%	0%
<i>Special education help is possible for students unsuccessful with Tier 3 interventions.</i>	38%	31%	0%	0%
<i>My experience with Tier 3 students is limited.</i>	8%	23%	23%	8%
<i>Tier 3 students have previously received extensive intervention.</i>	0%	38%	15%	0%
<i>I have no experience with Tier 3 students.</i>	0%	8%	15%	46%
<i>I am able to keep a positive attitude when working with Tier 3 students.</i>	31%	38%	15%	0%

#### **Teachers’ Experiences Working with Students who Qualify for Services Under IDEA through the RTI Process**

The prompt to which teachers responded was “Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students who were identified as qualifying for services under IDEA through the RTI process.” This prompt resulted in 20 unique statements that are documented in Table 5. Of the 20 statements, only one had 75% or greater level of consensus.

Table 5

*Statements with 75% or Greater Agreement on: Describe your experience identifying, documenting, and working with students who were identified as qualifying for services under IDEA through the RTI process.*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<i>I am unsure of the meaning of IDEA.</i>	23%	8%	8%	46%
<i>These students are assigned case managers.</i>	31%	15%	0%	8%
<i>These students’ goals are monitored daily.</i>	8%	23%	23%	8%
<i>Regular and special education teachers work together with these students.</i>	31%	38%	0%	0%
<i>Students’ goals are revised as they progress.</i>	23%	46%	0%	0%
<i>Students are able to progress through school because of IDEA services.</i>	31%	31%	0%	0%
<i>The multiplicity of services is overwhelming for students.</i>	23%	0%	31%	0%
<i>These students are unable to think in the abstract.</i>	15%	0%	15%	23%
<i>These students are unable to apply new knowledge.</i>	0%	15%	15%	15%
<i>Teaching these students is like “trying to fill a bucket that has a hole in the bottom”.</i>	8%	15%	0%	38%
<i>Paperwork is heavy at this stage.</i>	38%	23%	0%	0%
<i>Work samples are collected from students and the special education director takes it from there.</i>	0%	15%	23%	15%
<i>Identification of students at this stage requires monitoring and research.</i>	15%	62%	0%	0%
<i>Using test results is better than assuming student weaknesses.</i>	23%	31%	0%	8%
<i>I have no experience working with students at this stage.</i>	8%	15%	23%	31%
<i>The students at this stage exhibit learned helplessness.</i>	15%	8%	31%	0%
<i>The students at this stage won’t think for themselves.</i>	8%	8%	46%	8%
<i>The students at this stage look for excuses.</i>	15%	23%	23%	0%
<i>The students cheat to satisfy requirements.</i>	8%	8%	8%	31%
<i>It is easier and fairer to determine who is eligible for IDEA services since the process</i>	0%	15%	15%	0%

*has been streamlined.*

### Teachers' Assessment of Response to Intervention Implementation at Their Respective Schools

The prompt to which teachers responded was: "Tell us your thoughts about how RTI has been implemented in your school." This prompt resulted in 18 unique statements with four at a 75% or greater consensus level.

Table 6

*Statements generated from: Tell us your thoughts about how RTI has been implemented in your school.*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<i>There has been improvement in the implementation of RTI.</i>	0%	46%	31%	8%
<i>The RTI process is slow.</i>	31%	46%	8%	0%
<i>Teachers struggle with the documentation of written goals.</i>	15%	69%	0%	0%
<i>Lots of time is spent on monitoring and documentation.</i>	8%	38%	8%	0%
<i>This process is working for students.</i>	0%	46%	31%	0%
<i>RTI can be effective when properly implemented.</i>	23%	54%	0%	0%
<i>Heavy paperwork results in teachers just "going through the motions".</i>	15%	46%	23%	0%
<i>One individual must be responsible for RTI to ensure effective implementation</i>	8%	31%	23%	8%
<i>I always use the RTI process.</i>	0%	23%	31%	0%
<i>I am comfortable using the RTI process.</i>	8%	23%	8%	8%
<i>RTI works best when individuals are held accountable.</i>	15%	38%	15%	0%
<i>RTI can be a useful, system-wide tool.</i>	15%	62%	0%	0%
<i>There is little accountability for this process.</i>	31%	0%	38%	0%
<i>RTI should be mastered first at lower grade levels.</i>	8%	54%	15%	0%
<i>RTI is currently unsuccessful at my school.</i>	0%	15%	46%	0%
<i>Students are resistant to help provided through the RTI process.</i>	0%	15%	23%	8%
<i>Tier meetings would be helpful.</i>	0%	62%	15%	0%
<i>RTI currently works well at my school.</i>	0%	31%	23%	8%

## *Goal-by Goal Analysis*

The statutory text of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as the scholarly literature related to special education, reveal several basic goals of the statute. Further, the literature related to the Response to Intervention (RTI) process reveal several theoretical justifications for how RTI might serve the goals of IDEA. In order to investigate whether RTI serves the goals of the IDEA in practice, the authors gathered expert opinion via a modified Delphi method. Below, the authors will apply the collected data related to RTI implementation to the goals of IDEA, and analyze whether theory has been born out in practice in the studied system.

The three primary goals of IDEA relevant to this study, and identified above, are: 1) the IDEA was enacted by Congress to provide educational opportunity to students who did not fit the mold of normality in public schools; “students with disabilities” in the language of the statute 2) school systems have a duty under the statute to identify students eligible for services, and to identify which statutory category of the disability such students have 3) once identified, the student has a right to an individually tailored program of education designed to provide for the unique needs of that student; an “appropriate” education in the statutory language. These goals are analyzed in light of the data below.

### **Analysis of Goal #1**

Regarding goal #1, there is some support from the data to suggest that RTI is serving to provide educational opportunity to students with disabilities. For example, experts expressed consensus about the following statements:

- RTI can be used to address academic issues
- RTI is for providing and modifying interventions
- RTI gives all students the opportunity for success
- RTI is a tiered system
- Tier 1 instruction is differentiated
- Tier 1 students can be successful in a regular classroom
- Tier 1 includes formal and informal assessments
- Small group instruction is used to differentiate ability levels in Tier 1
- Working with Tier 1 students is a normal part of teaching
- Not difficult to work with Tier 2 students if the right accommodation is implemented early
- Tier 2 students can return to Tier 1 with interventions/modifications
- Students who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions are moved to Tier 3
- Tier 3 students struggle after the Tier 2 intervention
- Tier 3 interventions are more intensive than Tier 2 interventions
- Remediation for Tier 3 students focuses on critical areas
- Tier 3 includes one-on-one interventions
- Tier 3 includes small group interventions
- Tier 3 includes extended time for interventions

These statements can usefully be categorized into two types: belief statements, and descriptive statements about the technicalities of how RTI is implemented. Summarized, the belief statements that gained consensus indicated a belief on the teachers' part that RTI gives all students the opportunity for success, that RTI can be used to address academic issues (read deficiencies, or problems), and that working with Tier 1 students is a normal part of teaching, and working with Tier 2 students is not difficult if accommodations are implemented early. Also summarized, the descriptive statements that gained consensus describe a tiered system designed to accommodate exceptionalities in a proactive manner, with the implied intent of helping students overcome deficiencies and succeed in the normal classroom setting. Moreover, the descriptive statements indicate the use of specific strategies of remediation commonly used in supporting students with disabilities, i.e., small-group and one-on-one instruction. In contrast to the consensus statements in the preceding paragraph, the failure of some statements to gain consensus suggests that RTI does not support the IDEA goal of providing educational opportunity to students with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> For example, the following statements failed to reach consensus:

- RTI provides extra support for struggling students
- Tier 2 students need extra help to catch up with peers
- Tier 3 students are monitored by the grade level Student Support Team
- Special education help is possible for students unsuccessful with Tier 3 interventions
- I am able to keep a positive attitude when working with Tier 3 students
- I am unsure of the meaning of IDEA(no consensus of disagreement)
- Students' goals are revised as they progress
- Students are able to progress through school because of IDEA services
- This process is working for students; RTI currently works well at my school

These statements may also be categorized into belief statements and descriptive statements about the technicalities of RTI implementation. Summarized, the belief statements that failed to gain consensus indicated a lack of belief on the teachers' part that RTI is actually working in the studied system. To highlight this point, one of the rejected statements was "RTI currently works well at my school." Only 31% of teachers agreed with this statement, and none strongly agreed. In contrast 23% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. Thus, as many teachers in the studied system believe RTI is not working well as believe it is working well. Belief statements that failed to gain consensus also indicate that teachers in the studied system do not believe that IDEA helps students progress through school, do not believe that RTI provides extra support for struggling students, or that struggling students need extra help. Further, they do not believe that special education help is available for students who are unsuccessful after working through all three tiers of the RTI process, and they are unable to keep a positive attitude when working with Tier 3 students. Only 31% of teachers indicated any surety of the meaning of IDEA. The failure of some descriptive technical statements to gain consensus also tend to negate the proposition that

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<sup>2</sup> The reader will recall that all statements were generated independently by the experts who took part in the study, and were then presented to all participants to gauge the level of consensus. The statements that failed to gain consensus may indicate a lack of clarity in policy understanding and/or a lack of consistency in implementation.

RTI supports IDEA's goal #1. Such statements indicate lack of consensus that students in the RTI process are monitored by appropriate parties.

## **Analysis of Goal #2**

Regarding goal #2, there is some support from the data to suggest that RTI serves to identify students with disabilities, and to help place them in the appropriate category as listed in §1401(3)(a)(i)(ii) of the IDEA. For example, experts expressed consensus about the following statements:

- RTI gives all students the opportunity for success
- RTI is a tiered system
- Tier 1 instruction is differentiated
- Tier 1 includes formal and informal assessments
- Small group instruction is used to differentiate ability levels in Tier 1
- Tier 1 documentation is manageable
- Working with Tier 1 students is a normal part of teaching
- I have no experience with Tier 1 students(77% disagree)
- Not difficult to work with Tier 2 students if the right accommodation is implemented early
- Tier 2 students can return to Tier 1 with interventions/modifications
- Students who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions are moved to Tier 3
- Tier 3 interventions are more intensive than Tier 2 interventions
- Remediation for Tier 3 students focuses on critical areas
- Tier 3 includes one-on-one interventions
- Tier 3 includes small group interventions
- Tier 3 includes extended time for interventions
- Identification of students at this stage requires monitoring and research
- RTI can be effective when properly implemented
- RTI can be a useful, system-wide tool

As with the analysis of goal #1, the data related to goal #2 can be divided into belief statements and technical descriptive statements for the purpose of analysis. Summarized, the belief statements indicate that the teachers in the studied system view RTI as a process that can provide opportunity for success for all students. In the context of this study, one can infer that "all" means that students with disabilities can be identified and appropriate remediation implemented through RTI. Further, the data indicate a belief that RTI is a progressive system designed around the use of monitoring and research for the purposes of identification and remediation. The studied teachers also believe that working with Tier 1 students is a normal part of teaching, and that as students progress through the tiers, more expertise and time is required. Finally, teachers expressed the belief that early intervention is important when working with RTI students, and that RTI is a useful system-wide tool that can be effective when implemented properly.

The technical descriptive statements related to goal #2 also provide some evidence that RTI in the studied system supports this goal. The descriptive statements that gained consensus describe

a system that is wide at the base and narrow at the top: that is, at Tier 1, all students are monitored both informally and formally, and are provided with both group and individualized instruction or remediation as appropriate so that students can be successful in the regular classroom and curriculum. At the top of the pyramid are students identified as eligible for IDEA services through the RTI process. Through the tiers, monitoring and documentation become more intensive, as does teacher time dedicated to working with the relevant students and doing required paperwork. Further, teachers find different levels of accommodation through the tiers that allow some students to be successful without the provision of IDEA services. Notably, students who are successful in Tier 2 can return to Tier 1 over time. This is consistent with goal #2. It not only helps identify those students eligible for services, but, by inference, prevents some students from being misidentified as having a disability by allowing them to be successful in the regular classroom.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the above analysis, there is also support from the data that negates the proposition that RTI supports goal #2 of IDEA. This support comes in the form of one statement that did achieve consensus, and from several other statements that failed to achieve consensus. The relevant statement that did achieve consensus was “Teachers struggle with the documentation of written goals.” The writing and monitoring of student progress toward goals are integral aspects of the RTI process, as well as of IDEA. It is problematic that teachers are struggling with these aspects of the process. Alone, however, this does not mean that teachers are not doing a good job of it. Professionals often have to work hard at a process to be good at it. This consensus statement is too vague to lead to conclusions by itself. However, the following statements that failed to achieve consensus are illustrative:

- RTI provides extra support for struggling students
- My students respond well to Tier 1 interventions
- RTI is for identifying disabilities
- Most students are at Tier 1
- Tier 2 students struggle with academics
- Tier 2 students need extra help to catch up with peers
- Tier 2 students need small group instruction to be successful
- Tier 2 students need one-on-one instruction to be successful
- Tier 2 students need extra time to be successful
- Weekly progress monitoring should be used to identify Tier 2 students
- Tier 3 students are monitored by the grade level Student Support Team
- Learning gaps have hampered the progress of Tier 3 students
- The Tier 3 step requires Student Support Team Paperwork
- Special education help is possible for students unsuccessful with Tier 3 interventions
- Tier 3 students have previously received extensive intervention
- Regular and special education teachers work together with these students
- Using test results is better than assuming student weaknesses

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<sup>3</sup> This is a particularly important feature as qualifying for IDEA services involves a two part test: one must have a qualifying disability and one must need services as a result. If a student can function with less-than-IDEA level remediation in the classroom, then he or she does not need services under the statute.

- It is easier and fairer to determine who is eligible for IDEA services since the process has been streamlined (only 15% agreed, none strongly; 15% disagreed, none strongly.)
- There has been improvement in the implementation of RTI
- Lots of time is spent on monitoring and documentation
- This process is working for students
- I always use the RTI process
- I am comfortable using the RTI process
- RTI is currently unsuccessful at my school
- RTI currently works well at my school

Summarized, the statements that failed to gain consensus listed above do not paint a picture of successful RTI implementation supportive of IDEA goal #2. The belief statements seem to indicate a lack of widespread understanding of the RTI process. Teachers did not agree, for example, that RTI provides extra support for struggling students, or that students respond well to Tier 1 interventions. They did not agree that the purpose of RTI is to identify disabilities, that students in Tier 2 need extra time and help to be successful, or that Tier 3 students have been hampered by a learning gap. They did not agree that using test results (to identify student weaknesses) was better than merely assuming them, or that RTI has made identification for IDEA eligibility “easier and fairer.”<sup>4</sup> There was no consensus of teachers who felt comfortable with the RTI process, or who always use it, or who believe that RTI “works well at my school.”

There were several technical descriptive statements relevant to goal #2 that failed to gain consensus. Viewed together, they indicate a lack of agreement about how the RTI process works in the studied system. For example, teachers do not agree about when during the process the grade level student support team becomes involved, or what type of paperwork is required at the Tier 3 level. They do not agree about which students are served by Tier 1, about the level of progress monitoring appropriate for Tier 2 students, nor about the level of intervention that Tier 3 students have already received.

### **Analysis of Goal #3**

Regarding goal #3, there is some evidence in the data that the use of RTI in the studied system could lead to an “appropriate” education for students who are ultimately identified as eligible for IDEA services. However, almost none of the expert-generated statements directly address the issue of providing an appropriate education pursuant to IDEA. Instead, one has to infer the likelihood of such from the RTI process as described by the experts, which takes place before development of the Individualized Education Plan prescribed by the IDEA. In the sections analyzing goals #2 & #3 above, the authors listed data from this study that support the idea of individual goals for student improvement and remediation designed to help students succeed in the regular classroom. If these data are correctly interpreted to provide for such improvement and remediation, then RTI should prove useful in the development of an appropriate IEP. For a teacher to work through the RTI process with a student should take weeks at least, and possibly

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<sup>4</sup> The compound nature of this statement makes evaluation less certain. It is possible for something to be fair without being easy, or to be easy without being fair. However, based on the context of the full response, the authors think it more likely that the teachers responding to this statement inferred “easier or fairer.”

months. During this time, working through the process described by some of the technical descriptive statements that received consensus, classroom teachers should compile a significant list of strategies that have or have not worked with an individual student. Additionally, some of the belief statements that achieved consensus suggest that teachers' efforts through RTI should lead to better IEP development. Specifically, expressions that RTI is for providing and modifying interventions, and that RTI provides opportunity for success for all students, are consistent with goal #3.

In contrast, some of the data suggest that RTI, as it is actually implemented in the studied system, may not lead to better IEP development. Data that negate the possibility that goal #3 will be supported takes the form of belief statements and technical descriptive statements that did not achieve consensus. For example, there is no consensus among teachers about the meaning of the term IDEA, and no consensus (indeed, only 15% support) for the proposition that identification of students is fairer and easier through RTI than it was prior to RTI implementation. Further, the data indicated confusion about the technicalities of the RTI process in this system, including paperwork required and involvement of professionals from outside the regular classroom.

### *Holistic Analysis*

The data from this study were applied to the identified goals of IDEA one goal at a time above. The advantage of this approach was that it allowed for application of the data to the goals in detail. In this section the researchers will look holistically at the data in an attempt to answer the central questions of this research: whether RTI, as it is actually implemented, supports the legislative mandate to identify students who qualify for services under IDEA, and to provide appropriate services for them. In answer to that central question, there is some support from the data that RTI is effective in serving the goals of IDEA, and there is some support that it is not effective, or at least no more effective than the prior method of identification of a gap between achievement and ability. In order to reach supportable conclusions, these data must be weighed against one another.

In the analytical sections above, the researchers identified data that support RTI as a valid means of supporting IDEA goals. Specifically, consensus statements in the form of both belief statements and technical descriptive statements were included in this regard. But careful analysis of the belief statements reveals the relative weakness of those data as evidence in support of RTI. The reader will note the fact that almost all of the belief statements in support of RTI are conditional or passive in nature, using the words "can" and "should." Examples include: "RTI *can* be used to address academic issues," "RTI *should* be the collective effort of teachers," "RTI *can* be effective when properly implemented," and "RTI *can* be a useful, system-wide tool." In contrast, the teachers in the studied system generated and gained consensus on only one affirmative belief statement that RTI is effective in supporting IDEA's goals: "RTI *gives* all students the opportunity for success." If RTI were in fact serving IDEA's goals, the researchers would expect more affirmative consensus statements, as opposed to conditional ones. When one weighs one affirmative statement against four conditional statements, it is logical to perceive a lack of confidence among the experts in RTI as a system of identification and provision of IDEA services. Instead, the consensus belief statements seem to indicate wishful thinking, or perhaps support for the ideal of RTI, as opposed to how it is actually working.

Further evidence for the idea that RTI is not working properly in the studied system exists in the form of statements that did not gain consensus. In the aggregate, these failed consensus statements can be used to argue forcefully that RTI is not serving the goals of IDEA. For example, there is no consensus that “[s]pecial education help is possible for students unsuccessful with Tier 3 interventions,” or that, “[i]t is easier and fairer to determine who is eligible for IDEA services since the process has been streamlined.” In fact, only 15% of the teachers agreed with the second statement. When 85% of experts in a field do not express agreement with a proposition of that nature, one can reasonably conclude that the process is not working as it was designed to work. Just as explicitly, only 31% of teachers agreed with the statement “RTI currently works well at my school,” none strongly agreed, and 31% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similar numbers were produced in response to the statement “RTI is for identifying disabilities.” Moreover, 61% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Heavy paperwork results in teachers just ‘going through the motions’.” While the teachers did not reach consensus about this statement, the researchers still consider it to be a powerful indictment of the implementation of RTI in the studied system. Consider that more than half of the professionals responsible for implementing RTI expressed that they are essentially pretending to implement RTI, rather than actually implementing it as designed. The reader familiar with bureaucracy will recognize compliance focusing on the production of paperwork, as opposed to good faith efforts to carry out the substantive goals of the program.

Technical descriptive statements of RTI implementation also lead to the conclusion that it is not supporting IDEA goals. One consensus statement, “The RTI process is slow” is suggestive, but not conclusive by itself. Slow could imply careful and deliberative. But read in context, it is logical to read it to mean slow compared to what one would expect for the process. Again, the professional familiar with bureaucracy might be inclined to infer unnecessary delays inherent in the process.

Failed technical descriptive statements that are suggestive include ones indicating that Tier 2 students don’t need extra time or help to be successful, and that Tier 3 students have been hampered by a learning gap. These statements suggest a significant misunderstanding of RTI and/or students with disabilities. Tier 2 students need extra time and help by definition, and Tier 3 students necessarily have experienced learning gaps that are hampering by their nature. Otherwise, they would not have progressed to Tiers 2 & 3. Rather, Tier 1 interventions would have been sufficient to allow the student to be successful in the regular classroom.

### *Conclusions*

Based upon the above analysis the authors must conclude that significant problems exist with the RTI process as it is actually implemented in the studied system. It appears that teachers do not have much faith in RTI, do not use it consistently, and often just “go through the motions” of implementing it. Further, they are not particularly well-versed in the technicalities of RTI implementation, are not well-informed about RTI’s connection to the IDEA, and RTI is not a well-coordinated approach in the studied system.

These conclusions inevitably lead to some important questions for further research. The obvious question is whether the studied system is anomalous, or whether RTI implementation is problematic in other systems as well. Replication of this study in other school systems is recommended to answer this question. If RTI implementation were shown to be problematic elsewhere, that would be suggestive. It is possible that teachers in the studied system had insufficient training to implement RTI effectively, but it is also possible that systemic flaws exist that make RTI unsuitable for its intended purpose. One might speculate, for example, that regular classroom teachers have insufficient time to carry out all the procedures associated with RTI implementation while at the same time performing their regular teaching duties. If the goals of IDEA are to be furthered in an effective, conscientious manner, further study of this issue is needed in order to answer these questions.

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