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# RTI Success

Proven Tools and Strategies for  
Schools and Classrooms



**Implement:** Step-by-step administrator guidelines to prepare schools for RTI

**Assess:** Teacher tools to collect data and make decisions across RTI tiers

**Instruct:** Research-based strategies and differentiation techniques for student success

Elizabeth Whitten, Ph.D., Kelli J. Esteves, Ed.D.,  
and Alice Woodrow, Ed.D.

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Schools and Classrooms

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## Dedication

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I am particularly indebted to my husband, Mike, who has continued to support me through the long process of writing and rewriting this book. I would like to dedicate this book to my three children, Mackenzie, Malley, and Matt, who make me smile and laugh. I have been blessed by their presence in my life. I also dedicate this book to my mother and sister, who have provided me with endless support and encouragement throughout my lifetime. —*Elizabeth Whitten*

I consider myself tremendously fortunate to have such wonderfully supportive parents and friends. Thanks for the guidance and encouragement over the years. I would also like to thank Dean, my husband, for his endless support, and my children, Ava and Alex, who bring me true joy each and every day. I love you very much and dedicate this book to you. —*Kelli J. Esteves*

I would like to thank my parents who have provided me with a loving and secure environment to personally and professionally grow. I dedicate this book to my children, Parker and Addison, who have given meaning to my life beyond my imagination. —*Alice Woodrow*

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# Introduction

**R**esponse to Intervention (RTI) is an innovative approach for meeting the challenges of today's diverse classroom. The model began to gain prominence after the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognized it as an alternative means for identifying students with specific learning disabilities.

RTI is much more than a diagnostic process. It is designed to improve the achievement of *all* students. The RTI framework emphasizes the importance of quality teaching, early intervention, and progress monitoring through effective instruction. The intention is to address students' unique learning needs before severe academic problems requiring special education services can develop.

We have worked with many educators implementing RTI in schools, and we know that the model can lead to questions. Many teachers have heard or read about RTI as the "next big thing" in education but are unsure how it will affect their work in the classroom. Administrators intrigued by the potential benefits of the model are looking for assistance to help make it a reality in their schools. Even those educators who are very familiar with RTI may feel less clear on how to move from theory into practice.

*RTI Success* can help fill this need. The book provides comprehensive information on RTI, and then goes further, supplying hands-on, how-to tools teachers can use to help students succeed in the classroom. At the same time, it provides administrators with step-by-step implementation guidelines and practical solutions to challenges that can arise in building a strong RTI program and coordinating services throughout an entire school or district.

Whatever your role—teacher, special educator, or administrator—*RTI Success* is a one-stop resource for moving forward with the model in your environment.

## The RTI Model

Response to Intervention is a multi-tiered instruction model designed to promote school success for all learners. RTI first calls for the use of high-quality, research-based instructional techniques proven to foster learning and limit

learning difficulties. These teaching methods are geared toward a student's specific learning strengths and interests. A systematic screening process is set up to identify students at risk for academic failure. Those students who struggle in the classroom receive academic interventions based on learning deficits as well as thinking and learning styles.

Within the RTI framework, teachers use frequent progress monitoring to gauge student achievement. If initial instructional efforts do not produce adequate academic growth, more intensive interventions are introduced. Only after more vigorous intervention methods are shown to be unsuccessful (through comprehensive assessment) are students considered for special education services. The model can improve students' academic opportunities and help reduce costs associated with addressing learning disabilities.

RTI encourages a great deal of collaboration and teamwork among teachers, administrators, special educators, and other staff. As members of RTI teams (discussed in Chapter 2), staff members make decisions together about student instruction. Educators work together (along with parents) to assess students, monitor their progress, and implement interventions, which include differentiated grouping and instruction. Organizing and sharing information with one another is crucial as students receive instruction at each of the tiers.

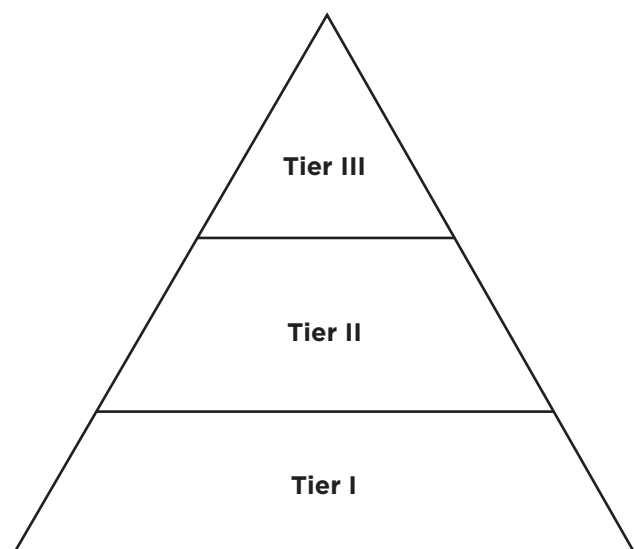
In an era when many in education are being asked to do more with less, some educators have expressed reservations about RTI, fearing it will add responsibilities in what is already a full school day. It's important to recognize that RTI is not an add-on. In fact, it incorporates much of what educators already do. While RTI does present some new ways of doing things, these practices represent a step toward meeting an important objective—the success of all students.

### RTI's Instructional Tiers

**Tier III:** Intensive interventions specifically designed to meet individual needs, instruction delivered in small groups or individually, frequent progress monitoring

**Tier II:** Focused supplemental instruction in small groups, research-based interventions targeted at specific strengths and needs, progress monitoring

**Tier I:** High-quality classroom instruction using research-based programs and instructional methods, universal screening a minimum of three times per year



## Why Implement RTI?

The focus of RTI is on the use of high-quality instruction, screening and progress monitoring for early intervention, school-wide collaboration, and differentiated instruction within a multi-tiered service delivery model. This powerful formula has the potential to dramatically improve how we meet the needs of all students and transform how schools operate.

**Increased focus on early intervention.** RTI's emphasis on screening students at least three times each year can help identify those with learning challenges right away. Teachers can then implement interventions to remediate skill deficits before they lead to severe or chronic academic difficulties. Schools may use up to 15 percent of IDEA funds on these early intervention efforts for the whole school population.

**Personalized instruction based on student needs.** Teachers design instruction based on what they have learned about the strengths and skill deficits of each student. This attention on unique learner attributes keeps the classroom focus on delivering instruction that works for individual students (rather than a one-size-fits-all approach). Differentiated instruction, a staple of RTI, allows teachers to simultaneously address individual, small group, and large group needs.

**Instruction driven by assessment.** Within the RTI framework, student progress is frequently monitored to ensure learning is happening. If it is not, a different teaching strategy is put into place. This can help prevent time being lost in addressing academic difficulties. Rather than try something over a long period of time without knowing whether it's working, teachers can verify a strategy's effectiveness with a particular learner.

**Improved quality of instruction.** RTI emphasizes the need for quality teaching through use of research-based instructional methods. When teaching methods are grounded in research, students have the best chance of success. Additionally, the model involves ongoing professional development. This training in use of assessment tools and proven curriculum, teaching strategies, and academic interventions allows schools to raise the bar when it comes to instruction.

**Focus on positive relationships in the classroom.** Within the RTI framework, teachers identify students' unique characteristics. This information can be helpful in creating a classroom where learners feel supported and confident in who they are. They are also more likely to be motivated when instruction accounts for their learning strengths and interest areas. Students will learn to respect peers for their knowledge and individual strengths.

**RTI can improve students' academic opportunities and help reduce costs associated with addressing learning disabilities.**

**Increased school-wide collaboration.** Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and other staff members work closely together within the RTI framework. School professionals participate on RTI teams, discussing student difficulties with one another and determining appropriate academic interventions. Diverse areas of expertise among these educators can help groups identify effective strategies. At the same time, shared knowledge of a student's challenges can ensure consistency in instruction. Collaborating together can also help staff members feel closer and more invested in one another's work. Many schools and teachers already follow principles on which RTI is based—it's the purposeful commitment to a consistent and comprehensive school-wide approach that gives it its strength.

## What the Research Says\*

More than a decade of research has established RTI as an effective model for addressing learning difficulties in schools. Many of the studies supporting the efficacy of RTI have been conducted by U.S. government agencies looking to establish best practices for identifying and addressing learning disabilities.

In 2001, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education issued a report suggesting that the discrepancy model (see page 12) be replaced as a basis for determining eligibility in the area of learning disabili-

**Many of the studies supporting the efficacy of RTI have been conducted by U.S. government agencies looking to establish best practices for identifying and addressing learning disabilities.**

ties. The Commission recommended a system of early intervention and assessment directly tied to instruction. At the National Summit on Learning Disabilities that same year, RTI was called the "most promising" method for identifying learning disabilities. These developments were reflected in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA recognizing RTI as an option for the identification process. Ongoing studies by the National Institute for Child Health and Development con-

firm that the discrepancy model delays appropriate education services to students. The organization endorses the early intervention services integral to RTI.

In addition to studies supporting the overall effectiveness of RTI principles, many others have been conducted within academic subject areas. To date, studies supporting RTI's effectiveness in reading instruction at the elementary level have dominated this research. Studies within various content areas are ongoing. The RTI Action Network (see page 11) is one place where you can monitor research related to RTI.

\*Batsche et al. (2005), Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), Bender and Shores (2007), and Hughes and Dexter (2009).

# About This Book and CD-ROM

*RTI Success* has been written with the needs of the entire school staff in mind. Some sections may be more useful to one reader or another.

**Part I: Implementation.** Here are tools for developing a successful RTI program.

- **Chapter 1: Response to Intervention** provides comprehensive information helpful for all staff toward understanding RTI as a school-wide model. The section explains the core beliefs behind RTI and provides a full analysis of the multi-tiered service delivery model.
- **Chapter 2: Setting Up RTI Teams and the Problem-Solving Process** details how staff can work together to support the RTI initiative and includes information for administrators who are putting together RTI teams in a school- or district-wide effort. Descriptions of RTI meeting structures and the problem-solving process illuminate staff roles in making decisions about instruction.

**Part II: Assessment.** A crucial aspect of RTI is ongoing learner assessment. This part of the book provides tools for developing a comprehensive evaluation program.

- **Chapter 3: Personalized Learner Assessment** provides tools for understanding students as individuals and learners. Gathering this information helps base instructional decisions on how students best learn. Tools in this section also help promote strong classroom relationships.
- **Chapter 4: Academic Assessment** provides information on achievement indicators important within the RTI framework. Tools for screening and progress monitoring are covered in depth, as are guidelines for making determinations about movement between tiers. RTI team members can use the Educational Profile at the end of the chapter to make and record decisions about instruction.

**Part III: Instruction.** The final section of the book offers practical strategies for the classroom.

- **Chapter 5: Purposeful Grouping** provides differentiation strategies teachers can use to meet student needs. The chapter includes information for creating groups that challenge and meet the learning needs of all students within diverse classrooms.
- **Chapter 6: Research-Based Teaching** features hundreds of proven instructional methods to use with learners of diverse backgrounds. “What to Try When” charts allow teachers to identify promising instructional methods based on student attributes and learning deficits.



Within each of these chapters, you'll find a wide range of helpful elements. The figures located throughout provide at-a-glance information about RTI. "Spotlight" features detail key information about the framework and demonstrate how to carry out important RTI processes. The "RTI in Action" elements offer instructive examples of how the model is being carried out in other schools. The "Tech Tools" provide Web links where you can learn more about important aspects of RTI.

Throughout the book you will also find reproducible forms that can be used in planning, implementing, and carrying out RTI. The forms can be filled out electronically by accessing them on the accompanying CD-ROM.

## Does RTI Come with Challenges?

Because RTI is evolving at the same time schools are implementing it, certain challenges are inevitable. This book has been written with the challenges in mind and is designed to help address them.

One challenge, noted earlier, is that much of the existing research on best practices for RTI has been conducted in reading achievement at elementary levels. Guidelines for other content areas and secondary grades are less established. Additionally, confusion remains about the framework's role in the determination of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). While some states do provide guidance on best practices, it is often up to individual districts to develop procedures on their own.

*How RTI Success can help . . .*

This book features examples from across grade levels and subject areas to give you an idea of how the model can take shape in diverse environments. Additionally, you'll find a discussion of the model's role in special education referrals (pages 113–114) in Chapter 4. The Web links included throughout the book can also connect you with updates on best practices as RTI procedures evolve.

Another potential difficulty that can arise in schools implementing RTI is confusion about the model within the school community. Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and support staff must work together in new ways to support a school's RTI initiative. Significant changes in staff relationships and roles may be necessary and create the potential for misunderstanding (or even resentment).

*How RTI Success can help . . .*

Carefully crafted professional development can help increase confidence in your RTI initiative and ensure consistency in the delivery of services. This book and CD-ROM provide comprehensive information on RTI and a PowerPoint presentation that can be used for staff

development. Ready-to-use reproducible forms can also help streamline RTI processes.

Misperceptions about the scope of RTI within the school community can also present challenges. Classroom teachers may think of RTI as a “special education thing.” Even those who understand RTI as a model designed to meet the needs of all students might perceive its potential benefits to be limited to students with learning disabilities. Some parents and advocates of gifted students, for example, may worry that RTI will move resources away from teaching students who already thrive in the classroom. While the model strives to meet the needs of all students at their current level, that message may sometimes be difficult to get across.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

Students benefit when teachers learn more about them as unique learners. With this information, teachers can plan lessons that engage and challenge all learners. It's important to highlight this information with parents or advocates who may have reservations about RTI. (You might share the PowerPoint presentation on the included CD-ROM in a parent-teacher organization meeting.) You'll also find tools for the practical work of identifying students' unique attributes, capitalizing on their areas of strength, and differentiating instruction.

Rapid, full-scale implementation of Response to Intervention has the potential to be costly. Depending upon a school or district's readiness for RTI, there may be a need for in-depth staff development and extensive curriculum resources. Considerable funding and time requirements may appear to be a barrier to implementation for schools looking to adopt the model.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

The practical tools in this book are offered toward reducing potential costs related to training, progress monitoring, and resource requirements. Also, the resources that appear throughout provide Web links where additional tools (often cost-free) can be found. One other thing to keep in mind: RTI can save districts money (and in effect “pay for itself”) by reducing the number of special education referrals.

This last potential concern highlights a very important point: RTI can be implemented in stages. Schools may start, for example, by either piloting the program in limited locations or at specific grade levels across the district. Training and resource decisions can thus be made on a limited scale.

**RTI can be implemented in stages. Schools may start, for example, by either piloting the program in limited locations or at specific grade levels across the district. Training and resource decisions can thus be made on a limited scale.**

## Before You Begin

While this book presents a structure to follow and a wealth of tools to support your RTI initiative, it is not a rigid blueprint. All of the recommendations are offered with the caveat that specific situations at your school or in your classroom may call for doing things in a different way. The goal of RTI is not to complete some “official” version of the model. Rather, the very nature of the framework calls for meeting the unique needs of each student. Just as there is no single way to teach, there is no uniform way in which to administer RTI. This will be left to each school or district.

When implemented well, RTI can reduce the over-identification of students with learning disabilities and better unify general education and special education services. This convergence of resources can have positive effects as the importance of labeling some students is diminished and greater focus is placed on the skill development of all students.

We wish you all the best in your RTI journey. We are interested to learn about your progress and any strategies that have proven especially helpful in your setting. Please share your thoughts with us throughout your journey. You may contact us in care of our publisher:

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**“There is a  
brilliant child  
locked inside  
every student.”**

—Marva Collins, educator  
and author of *Ordinary  
Children, Extraordinary  
Teachers*

## Part I

# Implementation

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a school-wide initiative designed to raise student achievement. As a result, implementing the model involves coordinating multiple processes among staff members. Some of the procedures supporting RTI are most likely already in place in your school or district. In these cases, only slight adaptations to existing processes may be needed. Other procedures may be new to your environment and require larger-scale change to school schedules and staff responsibilities.

The two chapters in Part I are intended to help in your school’s transition to RTI. Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the model that can be useful in familiarizing staff members with RTI. The section offers explanation of the core beliefs behind RTI and analysis of its three instructional tiers. Chapter 2 gives step-by-step recommendations administrators and other school leaders can use in school- or district-wide implementation. The section also details the problem-solving process that RTI teams will use to make decisions about instruction.

While Part I is written with the expectation that RTI is a new instructional framework for you and your school, the information can also be helpful in environments where programs are already up and running. In these settings, the book may be of help as you seek to improve existing group processes and provide additional staff development.

## Chapter 1

# Response to Intervention

**R**esponse to Intervention (RTI) has emerged as a promising framework for meeting the challenges of today's classroom. But even as many educators embrace RTI as a proactive approach for addressing unique learner needs, others have questions. What are the three instructional tiers? Who is ultimately responsible for delivering intervention services? What does RTI look like in practice at the school-wide level?

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of the RTI model. Whether you are a teacher wondering about the implications RTI will have on your classroom role or an administrator involved in implementation, the section can provide you with information helpful in carrying out the model in your setting.

## What Is RTI?

RTI is an assessment and intervention process designed to help schools meet students' diverse learning needs. The model emphasizes the importance of high-quality, research-based instruction in the classroom. The intent is to foster student achievement and limit learning difficulties through use of proven teaching methods. This instruction also takes into account a student's specific learning strengths and interests.

An important component of RTI is comprehensive learner assessment. Screening measures are used to gauge academic achievement, diagnostic evaluations are conducted to identify specific strengths and needs, and early interventions are put in place to help students who are not achieving benchmarks. Progress is monitored closely, and more intensive academic interventions are introduced for learners who continue to struggle. Only after more vigorous intervention methods are shown to be unsuccessful (through comprehensive assessment) may students be referred for special education services.

RTI has many advantages over previous models used to address learning difficulties. First, it eliminates ineffective instruction or curriculum

as possible explanations for student struggles. Additionally, early intervention efforts can help resolve learning problems before they severely distance a student from peers. Another benefit: progress monitoring and diagnostic assessment can allow educators to target the most effective ways in which students learn. In short, RTI is an instructional model that is truly *responsive* to student needs.

While RTI has emerged from special education legislation, the model's focus on early, classroom-based interventions makes it primarily a general education initiative. RTI is designed to ensure vigorous, research-based education and meaningful, intentional progress monitoring for *all* students—not just those at risk of learning difficulties. Additionally, many interventions for those learners struggling academically (especially early on) are administered in the general education classroom. In this way, RTI represents a marriage of general and special education services. It provides a problem-solving process for making decisions about instruction (detailed in Chapter 2) that can be valuable in working with any student.

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## Tech Tools

### **RTI Action Network** **[www.rtinetwork.org](http://www.rtinetwork.org)**

Visit the RTI Action Network site for guidance on critical issues related to Response to Intervention. The site is a collaboration of some of the nation's most important education advocacy organizations. You'll find comprehensive information on RTI, planning and implementation tools, and professional development and networking opportunities. A one-stop place for vital best practices information, the site also features instructive profiles of RTI in practice.

### **U.S. Department of Education—IDEA** **[idea.ed.gov](http://idea.ed.gov)**

Visit this site for information on how RTI can be used for SLD determination and procedures required by law. You'll also find up-to-date information on specific regulations for implementing RTI in your state and details on how up to 15 percent of IDEA funding can be used for Early Intervention Services (EIS).



## Spotlight

### The Evolution of Special Education

Since passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), schools have been required by law to address the unique needs of students with disabilities. While this legal imperative has been a constant for more than 30 years, how schools have fulfilled these responsibilities has changed over time. Initially, students with disabilities were largely separated from peers in pull-out settings. A strong inclusion movement in the mid-1980s led many educators to condemn this practice, and schools began to (as much as possible) accommodate students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

In addition to debate over best practices for educating students with special needs, questions remain about how to identify learning disabilities. Students were identified for services under the learning disabilities category when a severe discrepancy was shown between ability and academic achievement. The most commonly used method for identifying a discrepancy was to compare IQ testing results and scores on achievement tests.

In recent years, many educators have criticized the discrepancy model as a “wait to fail” approach for addressing learning disabilities.

In the model, students cannot be identified as learning disabled (and thus eligible for special education services) until they demonstrate a significant discrepancy between their ability and achievement. Years of struggle might pass before learners receive the intensive instruction or remediation in problem areas that they might need. Other flaws have been cited: for example, the identification process does not account for cultural, linguistic, or other individual attributes that might influence testing results. It also does not consider the quality of instruction students received.

Policy makers sought to design a more responsive way to address students’ needs—a proactive model that could prevent chronic failure in the classroom. The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 presented language setting up RTI as an alternative to the discrepancy model for identifying students with learning disabilities. The legislation was influenced by other education reforms that had preceded it, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The emphasis on research-based instructional strategies included within that law also became a signature component of RTI. Data collection and progress monitoring, represented in Reading First programs, were also included within RTI provisions.

Within the RTI model, general and special educators work together closely to address learner needs in the classroom. This collaborative approach to instruction is not new but based on another movement: the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Introduced in the 1980s, it also featured educators of diverse teaching backgrounds collaborating in the general education classroom. Although the initiative had the support of special education teachers, it was unsuccessful because it lacked the support of general educators, a fact that underscores the importance of school-wide engagement. (Chapter 2 features ideas for building support for the model.) Implemented well, RTI represents a distinct change in the way teachers teach and schools think.

## The Three Tiers of Instruction

RTI incorporates a multi-tiered approach to instruction. While the specific designation of these levels can vary, most school districts implementing RTI to this point have favored a three-tiered model. Tier I is the universal level of instruction available to all students within the classroom; assessments are routinely administered to screen for learning difficulties. Tier II interventions represent more targeted teaching methods directed toward students at risk of academic failure. For those students not responding to Tier II instruction, Tier III interventions may be required. These are the most intensive interventions designed to support students with the most severe academic needs. Frequent progress monitoring and diagnostic evaluation determine any changes in instruction over time.

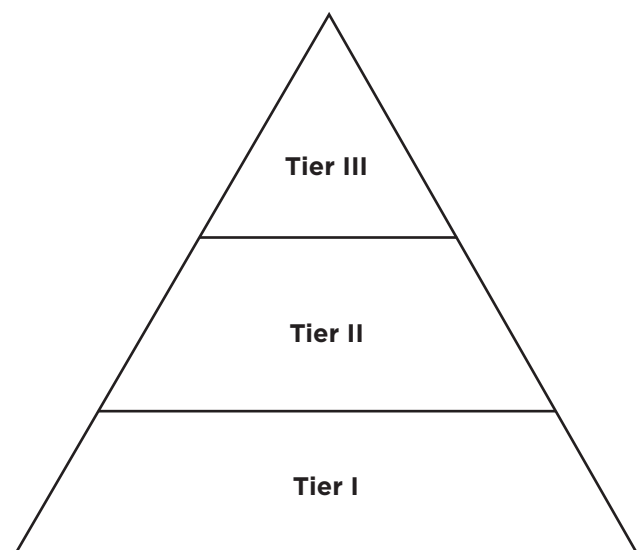
### RTI's Instructional Tiers

FIGURE 1.1

**Tier III:** Intensive interventions specifically designed to meet individual needs, instruction delivered in small groups or individually, frequent progress monitoring

**Tier II:** Focused supplemental instruction in small groups, research-based interventions targeted at specific strengths and needs, progress monitoring

**Tier I:** High-quality classroom instruction using research-based programs and instructional methods, universal screening a minimum of three times per year





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