

The Campus Principal and RTI Implementation

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ABSTRACT

The potential existence of a process that is a systemic match for the basic tenets of exemplary educational leadership leading to change, achievement, and compliance is the topic of this article. The paper reviews both the process and the role of the principal. “Response To Intervention” (RTI) incorporates the practice of delivering high quality instruction and interventions aligned with the needs and characteristics of the students determined through analysis of relevant measurement data. The analysis begins in Kindergarten and continues at regular intervals. The cyclic or systemic nature of this approach permits the development and adaptation of goals. The instruction determined most appropriate serves the student as a research-based intervention required by federal statute (IDEA 2004). RTI is not a program that serves as a panacea but rather a system driven by the context of the situation, resources available, and level of expertise of the members of the educational team. The principal’s role in this process is critical because the context changes and adaptation is a key skill needed by leaders to maximize the affect of RTI implementation. The qualities of the system, reasons posed in support of adoption and opposition, and the principal’s role in the implementation of the RTI system.

Student achievement scores in the area of reading instruction do not meet the desired, expected, and required outcomes of the students involved in our educational system. Dole (2004) notes that the goal of having all students judged as successful unsuccessful in reading exceeds the remains largely unmet. Justice (2006) states that the number of students reported a threshold limit that “can be attributed to ‘natural causes’ or even normal variability. (p. 285). Moats (1999) and Blankenship (2006) contend teaching reading is as complex as rocket science. Blankenship’s perspective is from the perspective of a teacher who works with visually impaired students. Moeneaney, Lose, and Schwartz (2006) stated that reading is “...almost certainly more complex. Given the same inputs, rockets will usually respond the same way. Children don’t” (p. 125).

There is a complex relationship between reading instruction and student achievement. The presence of a knowledgeable and skillful principal positively impacts the probability of increased student achievement. Response to Intervention (RTI) meets several of the critical expectations that encompass the relationship expected between leadership and increased reading scores. Hamilton, Brown, and Harris (2006) describe the relationship as follows.

The role of principals...has changed to one that emphasizes collaborative relationships, the interdependence between teaching and learning, the establishment of a systemic culture that has high expectations for all, and a generally positive attitude toward education and young people. The process previously outlined does not serve as a formula that ensures success. Rather, we expect it to serve as a conceptual leadership framework that will support the development of an exemplary and context-aligned reading program... (p. 23)

A review of the design, expected outcomes, and leadership requirements of RTI describe an affordable solution that met or exceeded the expectations of a leader seeking to establish a successful reading program. Elliott (2008) writes that RTI is “neither a fad nor a program, but rather the practice of using data to match instruction and intervention to changing student need” (p. 10). Qualities of leadership afforded the student, instructor, specialists, and school community determine, in part, the level of student success. The presence of a successful reading program is critical to the general success of students in other curricular areas.

Principals serve the students, teachers, parents, and community as instructional leaders. They focus on the elevation of student achievement and development of a positive climate. Yet, the overall dissatisfaction with the level of reading and literacy assessment outcomes continues to be a source of national dissatisfaction. The depth of the principals’ knowledge and skill levels increases the probability of elevating student performance to an acceptable threshold.

A critical element required in meeting these levels of success relates to the manner in which students qualify for Special Education (SPED) services. The student does not qualify for special services if the cause for poor performance is inadequate instruction. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 established this criterion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) extended this requirement with specific language related to the use of research-based interventions to determine the eligibility for referral of a student for SPED evaluation (Cummings, Atkinson, Allison, and Cole; 2008)

Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) developed a list of twenty-one principal responsibilities related to a leader’s behavior and increased student academic achievement. The average correlation of .25 summarizes their findings wherein the correlations of twenty-one responsibilities range from a high of .33 for situational awareness to a low of .19 for affirmation. These results are relatively close to the findings of Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) as reported in Marzano et al. whose study reported a correlation between leadership and student achievement that ranged from a high of .22 to a low of .17. The Leithwood et al. study specified three responsibilities as opposed to the twenty-one responsibilities previously mentioned for an instructional leader. These responsibilities are: first, setting direction; second, developing people; and third, redesigning the organization.

While Marzano et al. (2005) and Leithwood et al. (2004) report a direct relationship between effective leadership and increased student achievement. Studies of a similar meta-analytic design report an indirect relationship (Cotton, 2003). Another reports essentially no effect (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). The recommendations,

cautions and questions raised in these studies are problematic. Yet, the findings of those who contend leaders make a difference are credible and offer solutions worthy of review (Richards, Pavri, Golez, & Murphy, 2007; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Richards, Pavn, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).

The studies reviewed describe the relationship between leader effectiveness and student achievement. IDEA (2004) requires the use of student assessments and aligned research-based interventions as part of a student's instruction. The complexity of leading a school-community through a process resulting in deep cultural change is difficult. This difficulty is apparent when one reviews the reports that chronicle the failure in the national media and federal reports. An additional complication is the absence of a single way to achieve the desired and required success for every situation. For this reason, it is critical that a principal find a system as opposed to a program. This difference in the two constructs is critical to leadership. In simplistic terms, a system is a process and a program is an event. It is critical that process-driven change replace event-driven change in a project of this magnitude where strategies must continuously alter to fit changing student needs and context.

The tenor of the proceeding material focused on the relationship reported to exist between leadership and increased student achievement in reading that meets the criteria specified in NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004). RTI provides researchers and practitioners the opportunity to evaluate approaches presently used to address reading difficulties and shift the paradigm to meet student needs (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Moeneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006). In addition, Response to Intervention (RTI) has the potential to affect reading instruction and provide increased student achievement as required by NCLB and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) legislative mandates. The material in the following sections addresses the rationale for adoption, the qualities and characteristics of the system, cautions regarding the system, and the role assumed by the principal in the implementation of RTI.

Why Should RTI be Adopted?

Cassidy and Cassidy (2009/2010) refer to RTI as a concept ranked as one of the hottest topics in an annual survey conducted by the organization. Six guiding principles related to RTI listed in the February and March 2010 issue of Reading Today and two of the principles indirectly relate to the campus leader's role. The two principles are collaboration and a call for a systemic and comprehensive approach to language instruction and associated assessments (IRA Issues, 2010). The processes specified omit the role of leadership. This omission is perplexing when a review of related literature notes the importance of the principals' and other administrators' functions in the planning, implementation, and stewardship of RTI. The enhanced development and importance of reading instructors is both a critical and appropriate focus as is the incorporation of principal's role as a member of the team. The International Reading Association (Reading Today, 2010) supports the use of RTI in the reading and literacy instruction. The organization will publish two books on RTI implementation this fall.

This paper presents information describing the role of the principal as leader, facilitator, and supporter in the RTI process.

Prior to the reauthorization the Individuals with IDEA in 2004, student assessment used the discrepancy or “wait to fail” model. The use of this model delays intervention until the discrepancy between achievement and intelligence is large enough to identify a child with a “specific learning disability” (SLD). This identification qualifies the child for SPED services as Learning Disabled (LD). Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, and Murphy (2007) state that the gap is generally not far enough apart for younger students to qualify for help until the third grade. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) report the delay extends to the fifth grade. Either situation results in delayed intervention for the student. The discrepancy model lacks information related to appropriate instructional strategies needed to address the identified problems. The discrepancy model excessively identifies students with different language and cultural backgrounds. The outcome of this action results in the isolation of these students and they are not part of the mainstream of education. RTI “integrates research, practice, and policy” (Justice, 2006, p. 286). The RTI system addresses the problems associated with the discrepancy model.

The renewal of the IDEA in 2004 authorized the replacement of the discrepancy model with the RTI system. RTI incorporates regular student assessment, determination of the appropriate intervention based on the data analysis, delivery of instruction by highly trained personnel, frequent monitoring to assess the degree of progress, adjustments in instruction and goals, and the use of student response data to make decisions regarding major decisions related to the student’s placement. This review includes both general and SPED options (Richards et al., 2007; Elliott, 2008; Kame’enui, 2007).

The administration and analysis of assessments enable the identification of students unable to meet grade level core requirements. The determination of appropriate strategies focuses instruction on the needs of the individual. This enables individualization of instruction. Appropriate implementation of the RTI system reduces the number of unnecessary referrals and placement of students in SPED. RTI excludes both inadequately instructed students and those placed due to cultural or linguistic differences (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Justice, 2006).

The Structure of RTI

The RTI system has multiple tiers that range from two and extend to as many as six levels. The system promotes differentiation of instruction, provides early intervention, stresses the importance of a culture wherein all students learn, and employs a problem-solving process to determine the root cause of a problem, determines a research-based intervention, and assesses the level of change due to the instruction and intervention. Tully, Harken, Robinson, and Kurns (2008) describe RTI as a process that “doesn’t tell you what to think. It tells you what to think about” (p. 20).

There are organizational tier patterns of RTI and the number of tiers is context based depending on the location, context, and outcomes. There are three tiers in the model selected for review. Tier I serves approximately 75% to 85% of the students.

General education faculty provides instruction in the general core curriculum. The assessment models and frequency vary in this tier. This aspect is a primary reason for the development of RTI. Assessment provides early identification of students experiencing reading problems. Assessment provides the data needed to select the requisite research based intervention. Subsequent reassessment results in continued service for the student in Tier I or increased or an increase of services provided in Tier II. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) suggest that the elements of instruction become the “test” if elements of RTI serve as methods of disability identification. They further stipulate that the use of a scientifically developed curriculum and strategies that used with at-risk students require validation. Gerzel-Short and Wilkens (2009) describe an elementary school’s use of a Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM) three times a year to assess student progress. Data assessment teams use this information to determine students who should advance and those in need of additional instruction. Good and Kaminski (2002) in Klingner and Edwards (2006) report quantification of student progress using a system identified as the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) suggest the early administration of two different forms of the Word Identification Fluency (WIF) instrument. This instrument serves as a universal screening process used to identify those students who need to move into preventive intervention. Many Texas schools use the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) in grades K-4 as part of the screening process. In DIBELS and the TPRI the assessments provide links to research-based interventions. Students failing to adequately respond to intervention receive additional instruction and assessment for a specified period of time in Tier II.

A student population of 10% to 15% receives targeted instruction in Tier II. Students moved to Tier II exhibited poor response to large group instructional strategies with 10-15 students. Tier II students with 3-5 students in a group receive additional instruction over a specified length of time in a modified delivery method. The instruction and materials vary according to identified needs. Students receive Tier II instruction for a period of ten to twelve weeks for 15-30 minutes of instruction 2-4 times per week. The student exits this level and returns to Tier I for ongoing instruction in the core area when progress is sufficient. If progress is not sufficient, an instructional team designs a strategy to meet the needs of the student. A point of emphasis is that inadequate instruction for the student’s lack of success is first considered inadequate instruction rather than a student deficit. This position represents a paradigm shift of epic proportions and requires enlightened leadership to integrate the concept in the cultural fabric of the school-community.

Instruction in Tier III is characterized as intense. It includes students with LD’s or other SPED students. In general, 5-10% of the student population receives instruction in Tier III due to insufficient progress in the first two tiers. Students in this level receive intense instruction that may or may not include SPED services. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) support the incorporation of SPED in RTI. The incorporation of SPED provides flexible service allowing students to enter and exit the elements of intense intervention determined by changes in student needs related to the core curriculum. RTI supports the instructional needs of all children including students with special needs. This aspect of RTI is compelling because it addresses issues related to the enculturation of the belief in the learning community that all children can learn.

RTI is in the early stages of development and provides positive options for student instruction. The pace of implementation provides evidence of interest in the system. Pascopella (2010) reviewed the results of the Response to Intervention Adoption Survey 2009. She reported that “71 % of the respondents indicated their districts are piloting RTI, or are using RTI, or are in the process of districtwide implementation, compared to 60% in 2008, and 44 % in 2007” (p. 45). RTI advocates, cautious supporters, or opponents remind us that it is not a one-size-fits-all process and they express concerns regarding the system. The following section describes the issues and concerns reviewed related to this system. RTI offers experienced educational leaders potential solutions to the problems associated with reading instruction. It calls for a blending of this new science with knowledge and skills of a change agent.

Does RT Raise Efficacy Concerns?

There are issues that raise concerns related to the implementation of RTI. This is a natural occurrence and it is imperative that there is identification, consideration, and assessment of these issues. Summary assessment results in amendment, cessation, adjustment, or further study of the system. The following are representative issues related to the efficacy of RTI. Noelle and Gansle (2006) concerns are with the implementation of the treatment plan. The RTI system requires the implementation of interventions based on data analysis and identification of the student's issue. The implementation of the identified treatment may or may not occur. The implementation must be assured not assumed.

The role of the school psychologist lacks a clear definition in the RTI process (Nelson & Macheck, 2007). Two primary activities related to RTI instructional interventions surface as concerns. The first role involves the function of the school psychologist in the development of Tier II interventions. The second role is consulting those individuals instructing students. This approach generally applies to all those charged with providing service to struggling readers.

Vaughn and Roberts (2007) discuss the difficulty of development and delivery of appropriate levels of secondary interventions as a basic element of this new system. A further problem surfaces if the preventive instruction in Tier I results produces an excessive number of students requiring supplemental instruction in the higher Tier levels. Intensive instruction requires limited numbers of students. Excessive numbers of students assigned to the Tier II or III levels reduce effectiveness because it overburdens the system. Gerzel-Short and Wilkins (2009) characterize the RTI system as complex, ongoing, and time intensive. RTI requires ongoing communication as an integral activity incorporating all involved in the various stages of the system. The focus of all staff members' efforts is on the students and the provision of the general core of learning. The principal's role is leadership, guidance, and support in the implementation of RTI.

The funding of the RTI is an issue and should be added to the list of cautionary elements reviewed the preceding paragraphs of this section. The requirements for implementation of RTI require funding sufficient for the provision of resources for the

new or realigned instructional process. The following section deals with the role of the principal in supporting and facilitating RTI implementation.

What is the Role of the Principal in RTI?

Elliott (2008), Putnam (2008), Tully et al. (2008) discuss the leadership of RTI as critical because it requires a significant cultural shift. This requires all personnel exhibit behavior supporting the belief that all students can learn. All members of the learning community must assure student success regardless of disability, ethnicity, language barriers, or socio-economic status. Educators must first look at the quality of instruction as the cause of the problem rather than attributing the problem to the student. The learning community vision requires the alignment of improved pedagogical practice with needed resources such as materials and professional development for both leaders and instructors. The RTI system requires both data and research for guidance in the administration, analysis, interpretation, communication, and adaptations. The outcomes of this process guide the program and instruction for students with reading difficulties. As this becomes standard procedure, it becomes a part of the culture for the school-community.

In many circumstances, RTI does not require additional funds (Putnam, 2008). The funding for a new program based on a collaboratively developed vision for school improvement requires a reallocation of funds available in the system. Federal money is available and is substantial for the implementation of RTI. Two primary sources for this money are the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and Race to the Top Funds (Pascopelli, 2010).

The culture change related to the adoption of RTI requires administrators, general and SPED teachers, reading diagnosticians, school psychologists, and others to think differently if the new system is to be successful. Principals and other leaders play a critical role as facilitators and supporters in the implementation of RTI. These functions are important because resistance to the change is a normal outcome of the change process. A critical skill needed by those who lead is the attainment of consensus. A performance dip is a normal phenomenon associated with the change process. It is a phenomenon that leaders must prepare members of the organization to expect and overcome. The dip occurs because the individuals' fear the change and uncertainty felt when implementation requires the attainment new knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2001). Putnam (2008) contends that the greatest variable in implementing RTI is "focused and sustained campus and district leadership from the building- and district-level administrators (p. 14)". Leadership is a primary requisite for successful implementation of the process.

Conclusion

The principals' role in implementing RTI is critical because the context differences are different in every situation.. There is no program designed to fit all

situations. Each situation is different. The adaptation for each case requires strategies based on leadership and management knowledge and skills adapted to the situation. Legislative mandates and ethical behavior impose responsibilities associated with increased student reading achievement. The successful campus principal adapts to a continuously changing environment.

The RTI system provides the basis for meeting change of this type. Research-based interventions are applied when the measurement process identifies a student need. In the RTI system, early and frequent measurement monitors the changing status of each student. A successful student may exit the preventive stage when they meet their goals. Students failing to meet the established goals require further testing to determine both status and appropriate interventions. Designation as a SPED student eligible for intensive services is one option. Students may exit the program when meet their goals.

There are those who express doubts, cautions, and suggestions related to the implementation of RTI. The literature is replete with all of the above and it should serve as a call for prudent behavior by those who engage in delivery of the RTI system. As the principal engages in leadership activities related to this issue, there should be constant assessment of activities and progress. The leaders must engage in the acts of stewardship for all involved in reading instruction because teaching reading is so difficult. RTI provides us with options to address this critical skill for all students.

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