

Lessons Learned: Developing Strategic Professional Development to Support RtI Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Since the implementation of the response to intervention (RtI) process requires significant change from the traditional roles that many professionals have held, professional development must reflect high levels of collaborative problem solving. RtI has the potential to reform the way educators operate to meet the increasing demands of today's diverse student population. This article describes how one large, urban school district implemented strategic professional development to assist schools with the RtI initiative. The authors describe how an authentic professional development plan, based on recommended best practices, brought that school district into the conversation of RtI implementation. They conclude with a series of lessons learned for others wishing to embark on a similar journey.

Lessons Learned: Developing Strategic Professional Development to Support RtI Implementation

With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), the identification of students with disabilities was broadened to include documentation of how all students respond to targeted interventions, a process commonly referred to as RtI (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). This multi-tier system of intervention options is recommended as a way to use a data driven educational problem-solving process across all levels of planning, implementation and evaluation consistent with federal legislation and scientific research

(Batsche, et al., 2005). The response to intervention (RtI) process creates a model that has the potential of truly reforming education in substantive ways. Bender & Shores (2007) predict that by 2010, nearly every educator, general education and special education alike, will be responsible for the implementation of RtI practices in their classrooms.

RtI is a multi-tiered approach to providing a series of interventions with increasing levels of intensity to students that experience academic and behavior difficulties. RtI involves universal screening, high-quality, research-based instruction and interventions that have been strategically targeted to the individual student, and are accompanied by student performance data to guide and inform educational decisions (Chhabra, 2006). Elliot (2007) describes RtI, as an ongoing process of using student performance and other data to guide instructional and intervention decisions. Elliot (2007) further explains that three key features form the foundation of this process: (1) effective instructional and intervention programs must consist of core, supplemental, and intensive services; (2) frequent assessment of student performance must include screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring measures; and (3) data must be used to make instructional and intervention decisions. Working to achieve these three aims often requires rather significant change from the traditional roles that many professionals have held. What binds these practices together is a systematic problem-solving process which raises the level of professionalism through collaborative data-driven dialogue (Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

In order to prepare special educators to be participants in a problem-solving process, professional development must move beyond the delivery of content describing formulaic models of identification to alternative methods for determining if a disability is the underlying cause of a student's lack of growth (Brown-Chidsey, 2006). Educational teams are no longer required to document a discrepancy between achievement and ability to identify a specific learning disability (IDEA, 2004). Rather they must build a body of evidence that includes assessment information from a variety of sources, collected over time in alignment with instructional changes and interventions. It is essential that professionals deepen their skill sets to analyze and use data within a collaborative problem-solving process. The determination of eligibility for special education for students with a specific learning disability is made by staff and teams using a more sophisticated process that requires new learning on the part of all team members (Brown-Chidsey, 2006).

It is a daunting task to develop sustainable professional development structures for RtI implementation. The monumental change resulting from this effort is the relationship between implementation of RtI and increased student achievement (Batsche, et al., 2005). The measure of effectiveness of RTI professional development occurs at the school level where staff is expected to apply what they have learned to guide their collaborative conversations about student growth. (Killion & Hirsh, 2007). The gap that must be explored is no longer the gap within the student but rather the gap between what the student needs, what he/she is receiving, and how he/she is responding. The structure and content of such professional development experiences includes training for professionals in the development of technical skills to understand the use of data in their daily instructional life. Thus, with that knowledge in-hand educators will better

understand and then be able to address the gap between what they are currently doing and what they need to be changing in order to reach students who are not responding as expected. Providing those learning opportunities for educators to collaboratively acquire new knowledge and skills builds a community of learners and creates the promise of empowering educators to change their practices as well as outcomes for the most vulnerable students in the school setting (Batsche, 2004).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article was to describe a professional development approach that one large, urban school district undertook to support staff in acquiring the conceptual and technical knowledge of responding to intervention. The design of this systematic approach was particularly challenging for district level administration as it dealt with confronting the existing chasm between the practices of general and special education. Thus, we approached the design of this professional development initiative to address (a) common understandings and ownership of the RtI process; (b) guiding principles that would inform professional development; and (c) the construction a concept map that provided the structure for professional development activities. In the following sections, we describe our professional concerns regarding how best to proceed in creating a shared sense of agreement that was supportive of the RtI initiative with the outcome that school staff are able to implement RtI processes to benefit students most at risk for school failure. We then share the design features that were thoughtfully integrated into a concept map that served as the framework to ensure comprehensive coverage of specific skills and topics. Then we conclude with a set of recommendations for others embarking on similar large scale professional development projects. This article extends current information in the field by advancing knowledge related to strong professional development design with response to intervention initiatives. Ultimately, we hope that this effort helps all educators genuinely embrace the practices and programs that encourage student learning and be courageous enough to discard those that interfere with that learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004).

A Process for Responding to Intervention *Common Understanding: Defining the “it”*

The lexicon of professional educators is a language of acronyms, job titles, and program names that have a local meaning that only those on the inside understand. Teams in every school have a history that could contribute to a minefield of complex reactions when confronted with calls for a new way to problem-solving across all levels of planning, implementation and evaluation. RtI initiatives can potentially fragment school teams when individuals create their own meaning based on their own point of reference (Conklin, Conklin, & Conklin, 2006). As the educational term RtI began to surface in one large school district, statements such as “We are doing RtI” or “We are an RtI school” became frequent, but held little meaning for those saying it or those hearing it. With that

in mind, the first step that was taken by the Student Support Services administrative team in a large urban school district located in the western United States (See table 1. School District Profile) was to peel away the label of RtI to create a local, common understanding of what the “it” is.

Table 1

School District Demographics

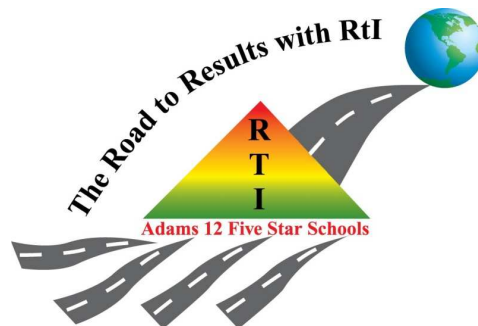
Profile Data	Teachers (N=1980)	Students* (N=37,341)
Ethnicity		
American Indian	10	347
Asian	25	1,900
African American	10	993
Hispanic	126	7,063
White	1,805	23,042
Gender		
Males	1,539	19,944
Females	441	17,397
Special Programs		
Special Education Services		3,216
English Language Services		5,558
Gifted and Talented Services		1,947
Free and Reduced Lunch		10,690 (29.17%)

*Graduation rate for 2006-2007 = 75.1%

Defining the “it” was the first task for this professional development initiative. Building a common understanding of RtI began with the Student Support Services team pouring through the professional literature to guide them in the creation of a working definition. The district-level work team believed that rather than using a predetermined set of training materials, time needed to be spent discussing an array of underlying assumptions and beliefs in order to move forward. In changing paradigms, it is important to see the old and new side by side and to suspend judgment in order to allow staff to come to their own conclusions about the models being presented (Buchler, 2003). This level of engagement is a clear outcome of effective professional development and was a critical element in the development of this plan. When the traditional deficit driven model of special education assessment and programming was laid out side by side with the collaborative problem solving model of RtI there was little resistance to the need for change, but the resistance came when individuals were asked to give up some part of their professional identity or skill set in order to move forward in this new arena. The notion that special education as a beacon or cure for the inadequacies of instructional practices was being threatened by the expectation that special education and general education teams would collaborate with each other to solve problems. The Student Support Services team believed that professional development would need to focus on explicitly teaching a research-based problem solving process (Deno, 2006) to a group of educational professionals who already perceived themselves as strong problem solvers in the traditional model of focusing on student deficits.

Based on research citing the value of nonlinguistic representations (Marzano, 2005) as a way to present new knowledge, the Student Support Services team created a visual representation of what they believed their aim was with this project. As displayed in figure 1, the team visualized that the school district’s road to results was with the RtI process. The visual helped to ensure that the common focus was on student outcomes and with that as a reference, the team then worked on the words. The graphic representation allowed groups to have the opportunity to construct meaning and to share what the visual represented to them as a way to foster engagement while providing a structure for open-ended thinking. What the team developed is not unique, but it is reflective of the local ownership and meaning that is necessary to develop common understanding: *“Response to intervention is a systematic process for sustained student academic and behavioral learning. This school-wide effort is lead by the school administrator and tailored to the unique needs of each school”* (Steele & Viveiros, 2007).

Figure 1. The Road to Results with RtI, illustrating a visual representation of the project aim.



The next step in working towards a common understanding was to provide more clarity in the form of guiding principles and actions. An initial set of guiding principles were crafted by the Student Support Services team and were subsequently revised and accepted by the larger Learning Services Department that included content directors and coordinators from literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and English language learning areas. The guiding principles listed below emerged as clear statements that would provide the direction from which professional developers could build.

- All students are general education students first.
- All resources in a school are integrated to increase student learning.
- Collaborative problem solving removes barriers to student learning.
- Student progress is monitored to determine responses to instruction.
- Interventions are supplemental to “Universal First Best Instruction”.
- Student learning is the outcome.

Concept Mapping

Concept mapping is a technique originally developed to represent the emerging science knowledge of students (Novak, 1995). Concept maps are widely used in the field of education to (a) communicate complex ideas regarding new knowledge creation, e.g., transforming tacit knowledge into an organizational resource by mapping team knowledge; (b) model and transfer expert knowledge; and (c) facilitate the creation of shared vision and shared understanding within a team or organization (Wikipedia, 2007).

Constructing the concept map for RtI was an essential illustration of best practices by designing professional development from the larger conceptual base in a way that ensures replication across various audiences throughout the district. Since one of the main outcomes was that RtI would be “owned” at the school level working from the concepts was a boundary that kept district level professional development from dictating logistics that were better left to individual schools as their means of engaging their staff. The process of developing the concept map involved many conversations with principals, district administrators, teachers, specialists and parents to address the underlying issues that needed to be brought to the surface. From those conversations, five main key concepts emerged including: (1) High level of professionalism; (2) Accurate and meaningful use of student data; (3) Intensifying academic and behavioral interventions; (4) Effective use of resources; and (5) Strategic planning. Table 2 illustrates the accompanying skill sets required to achieve each of those key concepts. Articulating this information provided the structure for professional development that guided the selection of specific of skills and topics to be directly taught and applied to school practices.

Table 2

RtI Concept Map

Key Concepts for Response to Intervention Professional Development
I. High Level of Professionalism
1. Communicate effectively to build trust
2. Explore the influence of assumptions and beliefs on school practice
3. Continually Improve professional skills
4. Collaborate to increase shared ownership of student learning
5. Apply problem-solving strategies to increase student academic and behavioral growth
6. Build leadership capacity
II. Accurate & Meaningful Use of Student Data
1. Understand what data from various sources means
2. Interpret and analyze data to understand patterns and trends related to student growth.
3. Triangulate data to develop a thorough understanding of the problem
4. Organize and display data to promote collaborative problem-solving
5. Monitor student progress using formative measures
6. Develop practical strategies for using and sharing student data
7. Use data to identify and share effective practices that have increased results
III. Intensifying Academic and Behavioral Interventions
1. Understand interventions are supplemental to universal first best instruction
2. Apply differentiation of instruction and assessment to all tiers
3. Organize school-wide academic and behavioral interventions into multi-tiered model

4. Analyze effectiveness of interventions to identify areas where intensity needs to be increased or decreased

5. Understand elements that change the intensity of interventions

6. Adjust intensity of intervention based on analysis of progress monitoring data

7. Collaboratively develop and monitor effectiveness of intervention plans

IV. Effective Use of Resources

1. Create resource maps to build common understanding of available resources

2. Explore the impact of allocating resources based on need vs. labels

3. Continually develop professional skills, knowledge and leadership linked to student achievement

4. Review and analyze student data to determine effectiveness of interventions

5. Explore and apply problem-solving to resource allocation barriers

V. Strategic Planning

1. Use relevant data to begin “with the end in mind”

2. Designate timeline for action planning

3. Implement structures across school community to enhance strategic planning

4. Integrate project teams

5. Implement use of technology to share and analyze relevant information

6. Deliberately plan for transitions and future steps

The selection of the focus areas of the concept map were created through a backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) approach that described what educators would know, understand and be able to do as a result of high quality professional development for RtI. The outcome of various professional development activities would lead to higher levels of professionalism where educators had the knowledge and skills to analyze data for the purpose of intensifying interventions using existing resources within a strategic plan.

With the concept map in-hand, the notion of RtI as a process to improve student opportunities was systematically presented to all special education provider groups (teachers, psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, assistive technology teams, occupational and physical therapists, vision and hearing specialists, and administrators).

At times there was a sense of frustration on the part of the participants who craved a formulaic approach that would tell them what to do so they could then go on about their business without interference from the central administration. Resisting the temptation through inquiry and dialogue was the most powerful tools we could have employed because with persistence every stakeholder realized that they would have to start by looking at their current program and the data to find out what they needed to know about and what was and was not working in their own school. Every cry for a prescribed list of interventions was taken as an indicator that problem solving was not yet understood. Professional development had to provide the foundation for educators to learn how to apply data to the selected four step problem solving protocol: Problem Identification, Problem Analysis, Implementation of a Plan and Evaluation (Batsche, 2004) so they would have a consistent and transparent process for determining which instructional practices and interventions were most likely to impact student learning. Since the purpose of problem solving is to solve the problem (Batsche, 2004) generating a list of interventions is only one component of collaborative problem solving. As educators became more familiar with the process, the creation of lists of interventions become more clear in the decision-making process.

Our Lesson Learned and Next Steps

The outcome of implementation of a response to intervention process is not successful implementation of RtI, rather Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline (2004) maintain it is using RtI is a means of connecting elements of a complex educational organization together to serve the end of enhanced achievement for all student. Essential to ensuring that those connections happen is a thoughtful, well-grounded plan for professional development. The work described in this article has provided us with some important lessons about the process and clear direction for our next steps.

Lesson 1. Developing effective leaders is crucial to successful RtI implementation

In individual classrooms and schools where RtI practices are being deployed, teacher leaders and administrators set the tone for change. When principals were put in the leadership role and special education staff members were given the charge to be resources in support of this principal-led initiative, more infra-structure issues (e.g. scheduling changes, meeting times etc.) were systematically put in place to support RtI implementation. Since RtI impacts so many aspects of the educational system (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2008) it is imperative that the entire district, including every school and every departmental leader work together to strategically plan for the resources needed to implement RtI. As professional development moves to the school level, the level of engagement of staff beyond special education has been more evident when the school administrator leads the charge. Special education teams have discovered that they cannot outpace their school administrators in RtI implementation and often find they become strong advocates of their principals' learning more and obtaining more training in this area.

In order to truly maximize the benefits of the RtI process, leadership at all levels is essential to ensure that the collective effort required to raise achievement expectations and close the gap in student learning is built upon strong systems that foster continuous improvement (Brown, Allen, Maynard, Jackson, & Stalion, 2005). Foster-Fishman, Jimenez, Valenti, & Kelley (2007) maintain, “Effective leaders within any social change movement have the social capital to leverage change, access resources and mobilize their constituency for action (p.351).” Fulfilling this lofty charge in the real world of the public schools is easier said than done, and we believed that district level leadership had to be the foundation to rely upon.

The implementation of RtI is a change that affects many components of the educational system, thus promoting strong leadership is critical (CDE, 2008). District-level leadership is essential for setting the vision and purpose of RtI and modeling the collaboration that is the cornerstone of this process. RtI implementation requires leaders with vision who see the need to close the gap between general education and special education. In this district, RtI was identified as one of three learning priorities and passionately articulated as so by the superintendent included RtI.

Lesson 2. Collaborative problem solving is a skill-set and a mind-set

Single training sessions have shown to not only have little impact on teacher practice (Killion & Hirsh, 2007) but such venues are ineffective in impacting the belief system that exerts such a powerful force on what happens in classrooms. Thus, thoughtful and strategic planning for professional development opportunities, using concept maps that focus on the key concepts across formal and informal settings, large trainings and small coaching dialogues, in schools and at meetings are essential. For schools that are in the early stages of RtI implementation an explicit focus on the elements of high level professionalism provides a means of establishing the norms and expectations while becoming aware of the beliefs that impact the work. The guiding principles provided by the Department of Education (CDE, 2008) and the school district go right to the heart of the mindset and allow for discussion about what the beliefs look like in practice at the school level. The skill sets for collaboration, for data analysis, for instructional planning are ever-growing, so again, it is essential that professional development is not introduced as a finite set of procedures that will be completed at the end of the session. The result of high quality professional development is that educators are inspired to continue to learn and grow and to reflect on their mind-set and skill-set as one of the most valuable resources to continue to grow.

Every staff member in every school that works with students who are struggling has an important role to play. In order for the RtI initiative to be realized as a catalyst to provide services to all students, all educators must be open and responsive to new ways of doing their already challenging jobs. Implementation of a RtI model may require a rather substantive change from the traditional roles that many professionals have held. A collaborative project with leading professional organizations including National Education Association (NEA), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), International Reading Association (IRA), and National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), International Dyslexia Association (IDA), and National Association of School

Psychologists (NASP) produced a series of papers articulating the individual group perspectives on the role of the professional within the RtI model (International Dyslexia Association, 2006). This collection of varied perspectives represents varied approaches to working on public policy, yet all voices for all organizations echo the need for professionals to collaboratively embrace this effort to work together. We are committed to continuing to build those needed collaborative interactions that serve to support each of our stakeholder groups.

Lesson 3. Track our progress and adjust professional development accordingly

The outcome of high quality professional development is that educators learn new roles and strategies that improve student achievement (Cook, 1997). We incorporated a number of measures to track progress and to provide current information on what is working and what is needed. Surveys were used initially to determine how staff members perceived their competence RtI implementation as a result of the professional development opportunities. The overwhelming majority agreed that they understood components of RtI, but a gap existed in their observation of the use of that knowledge in a school-wide approach. A later survey was sent to elementary principals and results indicated that most of them were still not prioritizing RtI efforts in their schools, though the overwhelming majority reported they were prioritizing and working on problem solving teams substantially differently from the previous year. Using the concept map as one means of evaluation of the quality of professional development as well as going to schools to observe problem solving teams in actions shows that much work is still needed to ensure that classroom teachers, administrators and specialists (including special educators) have the knowledge of the role they play in this process. Tracking the work means there is an objectivity to look at the information and to listen for themes and patterns that emerge. Everything is diagnostic when the expectation is established that all schools must be on the road, but that all will not be in the same place at the same time. It is important to interpret angst and inquiry carefully, knowing that an initiative that questions the way schools have done business since the inception of PL 94-142 in the 1970's is not easy or comfortable. The greater concern emerges when there is not a sense of urgency or a strong desire to improve knowledge and practice to make a difference for students.

Lesson 4. Share experiences, challenges and resources

One of the requests frequently made in a professional development setting is for examples of where RtI is being implemented. There is a strong need to share successes, to learn from other schools, to dialogue with educators in similar positions and to realize that there is no single answer or approach that will work for all students or all schools. RtI professional development defies the familiar approach that forms are rolled out and everyone must comply, or that a single program or curriculum is implemented for all students who present with academic or behavioral needs. Rather, it is essential to build on the practices that exemplify RtI and to be open about the challenges that must

be overcome for this to be effective. Multiple resources exist from many sources. Connecting to what is already in place in a school and to practices that align well with RtI allows staff to build on existing knowledge rather than starting over. As we share and learn from successes and difficulties, a culture of growth is established.

Lesson 5. If this were easy we'd already be doing it

Though the premise of RtI seems like common sense ---that the intricacies of aligning vision and practices toward effective implementation takes a great deal of thought and persistence, the challenges that continue to be part of implementing RtI in this school district are representative of the experiences in neighboring districts, large and small. From a systems level to the classroom, RtI requires the shift that Buchler (2003) describes as shifting from an institution of learning to a learning organization. In many cases, the RtI process provides a lens for educators to see the gaps that exist and with that awareness is the accountability to address the elements that can be changed. In spite of the many publications that simplify the tiers of intervention and other aspects of RtI moving, this to a system-wide approach matching the intensity of student need to the intensity of intervention will take a collective move that will occur incrementally.

Next Steps

With these important lessons in-hand, we continue to move forward with the next phase of implementation, clearly acknowledging this is not and cannot be viewed as a quick fix initiative. The concepts laid out in the concept map spiral to ever deepening understanding of the skills and knowledge needed to shift from problem admiration to problem solving (Elliott, 2007). The importance of alignment throughout the system becomes visible when seen through the lens of RtI implementation. More time is being spent with school leaders and interacting directly with school RtI/problem solving teams to collaboratively learn what is working in the venue closest to students and families. It often has the sensation of two steps forward and one step back, so it is important not to become mired in the hard work of changing school and district cultures. This implementation takes time, sometimes years, and has a tendency to illuminate some elements that need attention in the areas of curriculum standards, instructional practice and data analysis. Working closely with principals who are able to share their authentic experiences and continue to provide a variety of professional development experiences will sustain this effort. The most fulfilling aspect of this work is when schools see increased student results as an outcome of their efforts and remain committed to growth and change. With a strategic professional development approach sustained over time, RtI will reform the way educators operate to meet the increasing demands of today's diverse student population.

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