School Schedules: A unique challenge for RTI

By Barbara J. Scierka & Benjamin Silbergliet

Schools interested in implementing a Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative face many of the same hurdles that would be experienced in any other school-wide reform. One of the most concrete of these hurdles is simply the school schedule and its inflexibility in providing additional instructional time for those students who need it. While it is imperative that RTI be thought of as a school-wide (and not only a special education) initiative (Klotz & Canter, 2007; Batsche, et al., 2005), and that general education teachers and related staff participate in the delivery of supplemental instructional interventions, general education staff do not typically share the same flexibility of schedule that special education staff experience.

Reading interventions are best delivered in a tiered model in which dosage and specificity increase with the level of student need (O’Connor, Fulmer, Harty, & Bell, 2005). Thus, children participate in sequential tiers of quality core instruction (Tier 1), supplemental services delivered in a small group format (Tier 2), and intensive interventions for individual learners and needs (Tier 3) (Burns, Deno, & Jimerson, in press). Perhaps the logistical difficulty that many schools struggle with the most will be how to provide staff and students opportunities to deliver and receive Tier 2 instructional interventions. This article presents an example of the process one elementary school went through to create a schedule that would allow for systematic intervention for students in need of supplemental instruction.

WHERE TO START

We began by identifying students in need of supplemental instruction based on a series of target scores. In this school all students were measured three times each year and target scores were established for each grade level for each time period (Fall, Winter, Spring; Howe, Scierka, Gibbons, & Silbergliet, 2003). These targets were set by comparing students’ performance on curriculum-based measurement probes to performance on state-wide tests Silbergliet & Hintze, 2005). Students who were below targets required additional instructional support to increase the likelihood that they would pass the state accountability test. We decided to schedule 30 additional minutes for reading and math instruction for students below target.

A small committee was formed to represent key stakeholders such as the principal, Title I teacher, special education and general education teachers, and Reading First Coach. Our goals were ambitious! First, 90 minutes of reading instruction were required for kindergarten through grade 3. Next, we added an additional 30 minutes of supplemental reading instruction time and 30 minutes of math supplemental instructional time for each grade level. Finally, instructional groups would be as homogeneous as possible according to performance and no teacher would have more than two instructional groups during the 90 minutes of reading instruction. These goals were set in accordance with the recommendations of Reading First (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2007).

Many schools feel that they lack sufficient resources and this school was no exception. Compiling a comprehensive list of all available resources is both a good exercise and reality check. In this elementary school we had four teachers at both the kindergarten and first grade levels. In grades 2 through 5 there were three teachers each. In addition to these 20 general education teachers we had a special education teacher and three Title I teachers. Approximately three paraprofessionals were also available.

We wanted to use our Title I and special education teachers to deliver the supplemental instruction, leaving
us with 20 teachers who could run reading groups. We knew that each grade level usually had about four to five different reading levels within a grade. There was more overlap between grades than within grades in students' reading achievement. With a possibility of having 20 reading groups, we felt that we could certainly find the most appropriate group for each student.

Constraints were many. No student could miss the general education instruction in reading, math, and specials (e.g., physical education, music). Moreover, students had a 45-minute combination lunch and recess period, and teachers had a 30-minute lunch and 50-minute prep period.

**ESTABLISHING GROUPS**

As mentioned above we had 20 teachers available to lead daily reading instruction. Approximately 342 students were enrolled in kindergarten through grade 5. Simple division revealed that it was possible to have reading groups of approximately 17 students per group, but that would assume equal reading skills among all students. The goal was to have smaller groups for students with more intensive needs. Thus, the next step was to group students by examining their skills and instructional needs. Planning these groups occurred sometime during the summer to allow for fairly accurate estimates of student enrollments and available staff while still allowing sufficient time for planning and implementing the final schedule.

The curriculum used in this school requires mastery of a lesson before students can progress to the next lesson. Knowing the current lesson of each student gave us information about the individual’s skill level and made it possible for the team to know what experiences the student already had and what skills still needed to be learned. Each reading group was put on a post-it note that listed the lesson they were currently on, their grade level, how many students were in the group, and the name of the teacher. All reading groups were recorded in this manner and displayed on a wall. Our next task was to consider putting together groups of students who were similar in skill needs. Two considerations were made. One was group size. Only groups that were on or above grade level could be large (22–23 students), and those with students below targets would be smaller (five to seven). The second consideration was pacing. Some students may have been at the same lesson at one point in time, but the pace at which students were mastering lessons may have been different.

The process began by listing each teacher across the top of a white board. Time of day in 5-minute increments was listed down the left side of the board. We selected reading groups on post-it notes, sometimes combining groups, and placed them with a teacher in a time slot. Where we had cross-grade grouping we had to ensure that reading instruction occurred at the same time for both grades. Using post-it notes and white board markers allowed changes to be made quickly and easily.

As we created reading groups and scheduled their core instructional reading time, we also scheduled 30 minutes of supplemental instruction with the Title I teachers. We started off with the specialist (e.g., physical education, music) and lunch schedule as they had been the year before and only adjusted them when needed.

The lead author developed an Excel file to help organize the schedule. Each grade level was color coded, so that core reading and math time blocks, as well as supplemental blocks for each subject, would have the same color for a particular grade level. This allowed us to easily scan across the schedule to establish that no instructional blocks overlapped in a given grade level. Lunch and specialists times were also included in the file. An Excel version of this template is available for schools to download and use at the following website: [http://www.ties.k12.mn.us/DDDM.html](http://www.ties.k12.mn.us/DDDM.html).

For the 30-minute supplemental instructional time, we wanted to keep the ratio of teacher to student limited to no more than 1:7. There were three Title I teachers available to deliver the supplemental instruction. The number of students below target determined how many Title I teachers were needed. For example, in second grade approximately 14 students were below target scores in reading. Two Title I teachers were scheduled to work with these second grade students. In third grade, almost 21 students were below target in reading, so all three Title I teachers were scheduled to work with grade 3 students during their supplemental time.
Grouping and instructional activities for the supplemental time were based on students' needs. The grade level teams and Title I teachers met to determine the appropriate interventions for each student. Students were monitored using curriculum-based measurement at least every other week. Grade level teams met monthly to review student data and make instructional changes if necessary.

**CONCLUSIONS**

School scheduling presents a significant hurdle to the process of delivering interventions systematically within the general education environment. As such, it will be an important consideration for any school considering a school-wide or district-wide RTI initiative. However, following some key steps can greatly assist with this process. These steps include: taking stock of available resources, carefully mapping out the school schedule to establish any aspects that are inflexible, identifying constraints to the schedule, and finally filling in the school scheduling grid to establish dedicated time and staff for supplemental instruction. With a careful, step-by-step process, schools can approach the issue of scheduling in a way that avoids potential conflicts around system-wide change, and in fact promotes delivery of supplemental instruction, because it is now on the schedule.

**REFERENCES**


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