Question: Rita Dove writes of how we have become more multi-cultural, thus being more at ease with our differences while accessing common humanity. Our experience is that our children have become more at ease with differences in their classmates in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and physical disabilities. Do you think RTI can help us bring to scale classrooms that could respect and embrace learning differences and different learning needs?

Don Deshler: Something that our research has shown with RTI is that conversations about learning have become visible within a classroom. Students are asking themselves questions about goals that they want to meet and keeping track of how they’re doing relative to the goals that they’ve set. And often these conversations about goals for individuals and goals for certain segments of a classroom become just part of the dialogue and what is transpiring within a class on an on-going basis. And we have found when conversations beyond just a teacher delivering content embody things that students and teachers are talking about around the learning process--goal setting, measuring progress toward those goals, and why we’re pursuing particular skills or content knowledge and talking about the whys of it-- it just serves to level the playing field within the classroom. And when the focus is on learning, often it shifts away from some of those things that youth and especially teenagers focus on that tend to separate groups as opposed to bring them together.

Question: When Rita Dove talked about how we’ve become more multi-cultural, how we’re looking at things from different perspectives, she really talked about how we are building up respect for one another and from these different perspectives. Do you see a lesson in that for students building up respect for one another within a learning environment?

Don Deshler: I think the opportunity that is before us as teachers and educators within this dynamic is to really think seriously about the modeling that we provide to students. Sometimes we note some pretty strident commentary and demonization and polarization of opinions and as educators as we engage in dialogue within social media we need to bear in mind the responsibility we have to model what good dialogue is about. And to demonstrate civility in conversation relative to the opinions of others and while we may disagree how we can disagree but be in not in a disagreeable way. And if also recognizing that if someone is engaging in dialoguing on the Web and may not have the mechanics of written expression appropriately that there’s no place for ridicule or making fun of those kinds of things that may be taking place. So this just represents such a choice opportunity for new ways to engage students in the learning process and to give them practice in thinking about exciting ideas, getting viewpoints from not just the author but a host of other people, working with those ideas, manipulating those ideas and putting their ideas on the table to be considered with others.

Question: Rite Dove is talking about literature now coming in a variety of forms and formats using different media. How can this be applied to what’s happened with instructional materials?
**Don Deshler:** Another exciting notion that Rita Dove talks about is the alternative forms that ideas are being made available to readers, namely through the Web. But what we need to recognize is that the demands that relative to literacy that are placed upon learners when information comes to them through the Web may be unique in some ways than when it comes to them in text form. For example, if they are accessing ideas in, through hyperlinks and going from one structure of an author in structuring material to another very quickly to another set of base vocabulary and so on. To the fluent reader, we don’t think about those things, but to a student who is struggling, we need to recognize the movement from text written by one author to another to another as you’re exploring material through the Web may present a unique set of instructional challenges that we need to be aware of as educators and keep that in mind as we allow students to engage in these alternative ways of getting material. Teachers spend the largest percentage of their time when they have students involved in an RTI configuration teaching foundational skills in reading, math, and the basic skill areas, which is understandable and the right thing to do. However, learning embodies not just the acquisition of skills and becoming fluent in them, but developing a very solid base in core content knowledge. And one of the things that we find as the students move into middle school and high school, why they struggle so much, is that in the elementary years the emphasis of their instruction has been often in the skill, in the acquisition of skills because they’ve struggled in it. And sometimes they have been taken away from content areas for that added skill instruction. So they hit middle school, high school, and now they are lacking critical vocabulary, critical background knowledge and knowledge of core concepts and so forth. What is exciting again about what Rita Dove is speaking about is the way in which venues are now open for students to acquire this critical knowledge and vocabulary and concepts and so forth—not in their entirety, but when we couple this in a very thoughtful, well-designed way with what is happening through intensive RTI instruction within an RTI model in the skill areas, it can really help keep students afloat and much closer to the curriculum that they are supposed to be mastering along the way.