

## RTI Gets Promoted to Secondary Schools

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### *About this Talk*

Featured experts, **Dr. Barbara Ehren** and Dr. **Kathleen Whitmire** discuss challenges and solutions for implementing RTI at the secondary level, and share strategies for bringing effective supports to adolescents through collaboration between educators and families.

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Although the primary focus of Response to Intervention (RTI) in practice has been on children in kindergarten through third grade, the law extends RTI through 12th grade. While it is urgent to intervene as early as possible in the early grades to prevent the cycle of failure, it is equally important to remember that struggling learners in middle school and high school are also in need of instructional and behavioral supports to be successful.

In fact, the stakes are higher for secondary students who lack the foundational skills and strategies needed to engage in school and who end up at risk for failing or dropping out.

Our experts, **Barbara Ehren** and **Kathleen Whitmire**, discussed challenges and solutions for implementing RTI at the secondary level, and shared strategies for bringing effective supports to adolescents through collaboration between educators and families.

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Question from **Sue Walcott, science teacher, Rising Sun High School**:

What can we do about what I call student burnout in high school? Many LD students have had to work so hard and for so long by the time they get to high school where the work becomes more intense they just give up. They think of themselves as failures because they cannot keep up.

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

Burnout is very real for high school students who have been struggling for many years and who then find themselves facing the pressures of rigorous standards and high stakes assessments, often with weak foundational skills in reading, writing and math. While RTI implementation is not an antidote, it could be of enormous benefit to address this problem.

With an RTI approach, students can receive instruction matching their individual needs, with data on their

response used to ensure that the intervention is making a difference in their performance. Even more importantly, RTI provides supports within the general education classroom to help content area teachers address students' learning problems. Staff with expertise in special instruction can be available as consultants for classroom teachers to assist with instructional methodologies and accommodations for struggling learners.

It's important to remember that content area teachers are under pressure to cover the material that will be on high-stakes tests to ensure that students are prepared for those assessments. The teachers are in need of assistance to learn ways of providing supports to students while still covering the material needed.

Through a team approach, educators can collaborate on the best ways to meet individual needs.

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Question from **Lauri White, Parent:**

I agree that RTI should be implemented in secondary school. It may give children who were previously denied services, due to the old process of I/Q discrepancy testing, the opportunity to receive help before it's too late. My question is how do we as parents help schools at all levels to recognize how important implementing an RTI process is? Even though laws have changed on I/Q performance testing, schools seem to be clueless on how to use any other approach.

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

Implementation of RTI requires time to change policies and procedures. Parents can help by learning about RTI themselves, providing information to educators, and asking important questions. Parent can ask to see the student's intervention plan as part of RTI, and for progress on a regular basis. They can also ask how they can support the student's program at home.

Two excellent resources for you are the LDTalk by Dr. Judy Elliott, entitled, "[Response-to-Intervention: What Parents Need to Know About This Approach to Identifying Students Most At-Risk for LD](#)" as well as "[A Parent's Guide to Response to Intervention](#)"

Students benefit the most when parents and educators can collaborate and truly work together on developing their students' programs.

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Question from **Judy Ruder, SpEd Supervisor, Wichita State University:**

I am teaching an on-line class to general education secondary teachers. They often refer to students as "lazy", which implies to me that the teachers are unwilling to make adaptations for students. I have encouraged them to look beyond the behavior and seek to understand the causes. In light of what I am seeing, it would appear that the RTI model would not be readily accepted. Any advice?

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

Acceptance of an RTI approach will depend upon many factors, including the investment that schools make up front to prepare for this deep system change. School districts have found it important to plan for implementation of RTI through steps such as self-assessment, needs analysis, consensus building, teambuilding, and changes to scheduling.

Furthermore, research has indicated the importance of professional development in helping classroom teachers understand working with students with special needs. Your experience is an excellent example of teachers needing help in interpreting their students' behaviors and finding productive ways of working with them. Training is also needed to help teams of educators from the same building or district learn new ways of working together.

Finally, administrative support is needed for the time and resources necessary for educators to gain skills and knowledge and to engage in these expanded roles.

RTI is clearly a "full-team" effort, with administrators, teachers, related service providers, and families working together over time to implement this approach successfully.

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Question from **Diane Oringer Parent and Advocate:**

With regards to my son who is dyslexic. How do you evaluate response to intervention? Is it in grade equivalence, fluency, etc?

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

In order to answer your questions, let's look first at the RTI approach in general. RTI is used to gather data on student responses in both the academic and behavioral arenas, and across content areas (e.g., reading, math). The first step is to identify students who are having difficulties in any academic or behavioral area. Supplemental instruction is delivered, usually in the general education classroom, and the student's progress is charted. If the student is not showing adequate progress, then more intensive services and interventions are provided as needed.

Most of the work on RTI in the schools has focused on reading instruction in the early elementary grades,

because of the importance of good literacy skills as a foundation for later learning. This could include many literacy skills, e.g., word recognition, vocabulary, comprehension, or fluency.

Actually, if your son has already been identified as dyslexic, then the early steps of screening and supplemental instruction would not be needed. His specific reading needs should have been identified at the time of his comprehensive evaluation. The components of RTI that would be applicable for him now would include:

1. high-quality classroom instruction;
2. intervention matched to his individual needs;
3. data collection to monitor his progress, in order to ensure that the intervention that is being used is indeed resulting in improved performance;
4. fidelity of treatment implementation to ensure that his intervention is being provided correctly; and
5. data-driven decision-making regarding when to make changes in his program based on his progress.

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Question from: **Anonymous**

What would a RTI model look like at the secondary level? Would students be tracked into different level classes, like high, middle, low?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

I can give you as an example of a secondary RTI model the Content Literacy Continuum (CLC) of the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KUCRL). This approach is being used at middle and high schools across the country, including a major statewide effort in Virginia. Although its conceptualization predated widespread RTI implementation efforts, it is now being discussed as a secondary RTI approach.

The CLC is a school wide literacy initiative consisting of 5 levels of instruction/intervention to meet the literacy needs of ALL the students in a school. It relies primarily, although not exclusively, on the research-validated tools of the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) of KUCRL. At Level 1 all students receive instruction to ensure the mastery of content in general education classes. SIM Content Enhancement Routines are the primarily tools used by teachers across the school. At Level 2 all teachers embed literacy strategies in their classes to support students in learning "how to learn" in their subject area classes. The SIM Learning Strategies, among other strategies, are employed at this level. Subsequent levels are for students "who need more." Level 3 intervention provides more intensive Learning Strategy instruction than is possible as part of content instruction, following a research validated instructional protocol.

In general this type of instruction is the focus for struggling students below grade level in reading and writing, but functioning around the 4th grade level. This level may include short term and long-term

intervention, in both general and special education. Level 4 involves intensive basic literacy skill instruction for students reading and writing below 4th grade level. Here too short term and long-term intervention, in both general and special education may be included. Level 5 provides therapeutic intervention by a speech-language pathologist (SLP) for students who lack the language underpinnings for content and strategy acquisition. Although there are 5 levels in the continuum there is strong collaboration among professionals across the levels with the SLP working across all levels.

For additional information about the Content Literacy Continuum go to the [University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning Web site](#).

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Question from **Elizabeth Dohrn, Director of Pupil Services, Lake Mills:**

How would you suggest that we involve general educators in RtI. Students have as many as 7 different teachers a day, and if they struggle in reading, it may affect all these classes. Where do we start in the teaming process? Who should be the facilitator? Thanks.

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

It is essential at the school level that building administrators set the tone for RTI as a school wide approach to meeting the learning needs of adolescents. As such it needs to be rooted in general education. All secondary teachers need to be using scientifically based instruction, including methods for addressing content literacy (Tier I). Students who need more than good content area instruction should have intervention options within general education (Tier II).

As you point out, students who struggle with reading are likely to struggle in all their classes. It really has to be school leaders, administrators and teachers (general and special) who create infrastructures to support the kind of collaboration that needs to take place in an RTI approach. First the culture of the school has to support this kind of collaboration to do this kind of "teaming." I would strongly recommend that a facilitator come from general education; otherwise, RTI will be viewed as a special education endeavor.

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Question from **Kathryn K. Lee, Area Education Agency 10 school social worker:**

What are the advantages and disadvantages of RTI compared with previous "test and place" procedures for determining eligibility for special education?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

I think the most apparent advantage of RTI is that educators have a larger data set for decision making. By

assessing a student's responsiveness to intervention we get a much better picture of the student's strengths and challenges over time as opposed to the limited sampling that occurs during traditional testing procedures. That being said, the reality is that many school districts still rely on traditional methods for determining eligibility (including the use of a discrepancy criterion). Even though they may use RTI for prevention, they don't always utilize it for identification.

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Question from **Judy Engelhard, Associate Professor, Coastal Carolina University:**

Most programs on RTI, such as this one through NCLD, are provided by and through groups in Special Education; do you know of any general education organization who is promoting RTI? I'm thinking of the American Association of Elementary Principals, American Association of School Administrators and the like.

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

General education associations are indeed actively providing information for their members regarding RTI. We have had conversations with organizations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Education Association, and the International Reading Association, to name a few. These associations recognize regular education's role and responsibility in RTI.

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Question from **Chevella Jacobs, :**

What Options should the schools be offer to teens who have learning disabilities, failing in school, and may not graduate.

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

Let's say right up front that when we talk about "options" for students with LD, we firmly believe that failing school and dropping out should not be included in the menu of possibilities! Students with LD can and should be able to graduate from high school. Whether they receive academic or general diplomas, aspire to engage in postsecondary study, are headed on a fast track into the world of employment, or desire to combine work and study, failure should not be on their horizon.

RTI can help ensure that a student's areas of strength and need are well known prior to making exit decisions from HS. Transition planning, a mandated activity for all students receiving special education, should ensure that no student is at risk for not graduating. For more information on transition by downloading NCLD's free Parent Advocacy brief, [Transition to College: Strategic Planning to Ensure Success for Students With Learning Disabilities](#)

**There are a number of resources available at [ncl.org](http://ncl.org). Here are a few:**

- [Transition to College and Work for Teens](#)
  - [Adolescents and Young Adults with LD: Transition and More](#)
  - [Teaching Reading to Secondary Students with LD](#)
  - [Guiding Teens with Learning Disabilities-An Interview with Dr. Arlyn Roffman](#)
  - [Planning for College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities](#)
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Question from **Steve Street, Asso. Prof. SLD Licensure, MN State Univl. Moorhead:**

As I prepare the teacher candidates for SLD licensure, I intentionally teach that RTI is NOT a general education responsibility; it is a school wide issue. What is your view? We prepare sped teachers to consult with general education teachers. RTI expands that LRE possibility!

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

I'm not sure what you mean that RTI is not a general education responsibility. It is. However, it is not their SOLE responsibility. It really needs to be "owned" by all educators. I'm guessing when you say that it is a school wide issue your meaning is that it must involve a collaborative effort between general and special education. For sure that is true! And preparing sped teachers to consult with gened teachers is a valuable enterprise. (I hope that your colleagues in gened are doing likewise in preparing prospective teachers to work with sped teachers and related service providers. It would also be great if you could do some "cross pollination" by creating structures within the teacher preparation programs for these perspective professionals to interact.)

I have often heard RTI referred to as "pre referral procedures on steroids." Whether or not school systems use that term, RTI is too often viewed as more genuine intervention attempts prior to referring students for special education. Certainly students who are not responsive to intervention in general education may ultimately receive services in special ed, but RTI tiers cannot be viewed as mere stepping stones to special ed.

On another note I'm not sure I would say RTI and LRE in the same breath. I think linking the two will cause confusion. LRE is clearly an issue for students in special ed. RTI is not necessarily.

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Question from **Colleen, SPED teacher:**

Should RTI be used only with students who are being suggested for a Child Study Team or for those

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students who are already classified as well?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

RTI as a process is decidedly not intended to begin with students in the referral loop or already in special education. A linchpin of RTI is prevention. Tier I efforts to provide scientifically-based instruction for all students is a key RTI concept. Providing increasingly intensive interventions to struggling students before special education is even considered is another important component.

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Question from **Richard Boardman, CEO, Ranch Academy Charter School:**

In our efforts to implement the "Universal Assessment Phase" of RTI, I am interested in evaluating additional 1-5 minute probes (research based) suitable for use with secondary students. After a cursory review of some of the more commonly known systems such as Dibels, iSTEOP, and AIMSweb, I have only been able to locate information about one probe for secondary reading levels and one probe for secondary math. I have not been able to find any research based probes pertaining to science or social studies and would like to know of additional probes in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Any ideas would be appreciated.

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

I'm not sure we want to think of universal assessment at the secondary level in the same way we conceptualize it at the elementary level. For practical purposes screening may be viewed from a variety of perspectives. For example, students who perform poorly on high stakes assessments required by a state or district already present as students who need help. To clarify the role of reading and writing in poor academic performance, as well as to check progress, it is advisable to consider annual group assessment in reading and writing.

In one school district a group of people, including the speech-language pathologist look at state assessment results along with literacy assessment results of entering 6th graders to identify the students who may need intervention. Follow up interaction with teachers and the students help to determine the nature and intensity of intervention required. For students who appear to need ongoing, intensive intervention, aka "specialized instruction" a referral to special education may be in order.

In other aspects of progress monitoring, many school districts are creating benchmark tests (typically every 6 or 9 weeks) for subject areas so they have a standard method for assessing progress in specific subject areas on an ongoing basis.

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Question from **Lacy Rezek, School Psychologist Douglas County Schools, NV:**

With the intensive requirements for credits, tests to pass, etc. at the middle and high school level, how do you find/make time in a student's schedule to provide reading or math instruction to a student reading at a



3rd grade level who is in the 8th grade (or older)? The requirements for graduation are so great, there isn't time in the day for students to be given special instruction, and receiving help within an English class is so stigmatizing; the students hate it. What do you do?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

Your question goes to the heart of secondary school reform. RTI doesn't exist in a vacuum but in the larger context of the structure of middle and high school, with the latter the most challenging in terms of credit requirements. One of the major problems, especially in high school, is the master schedule requiring in most instances a semester long commitment to a class. We really need to be considering a host of options to provide students what they need to be successful in meeting graduation standards. Among them might be:

- Learning strategy courses for elective credit;
- Summer school bridging programs from elementary to middle and middle to high school;
- Before and after school programs;
- Saturday programs;
- Class within a class (more appropriate in middle school; e.g. language arts);
- Extended graduation (5 years for students who need more time).

However, a key issue beyond providing intervention in reading for students who are behind--is helping them keep up with their content classes. For more information in this area, learn about Content Enhancement Routines (validated by the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning) which are tools designed to assist teachers in teaching critical content to all learners, regardless of literacy levels. Visit the [University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning](#).

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Question from **Elizabeth Alvarez, SLP, Hiawatha Cusd#426:**

I am the slp for a small rural community school district (pre-k through 12). We are just now implementing RTI. My question is related to my role in working with students in the middle/high school who may be fluent English speakers, but whose primary language is Spanish. They don't have the depth of vocabulary that they need and if coupled with a reading disability, they struggle to keep up. My question is "how can I help them with curriculum related vocabulary in the widest scope possible, or get my "biggest bang" for my buck, without adding to their already large backlog of homework, study, etc.

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

Elizabeth, I am thrilled that as an SLP you understand that you have an important role with middle/high school students and further that you want to help with curriculum related vocabulary. Regarding the students to whom you refer, I am assuming they don't yet have the academic language they need to be successful in their classes, but they are not language impaired. A collaborative endeavor where you consult with teachers to help guide effective vocabulary practices as part of language-sensitive classroom instruction would seem to be a way to go. I would suggest that you work with content teachers to identify

the key vocabulary students may be missing and help them to design classroom activities to address the needs. Vocabulary stations in classrooms and in media centers, often with peers working together on vocabulary acquisition may be helpful.

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Question from **Joey Washington, Assistant Principal, AMCMS Middle School:**

Has there been any research or discussion about RTI as it relates to discipline at the secondary level?

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

There have certainly been discussions about discipline issues at the secondary level, since these can make the difference between graduation and dropping out. We don't have any research on RTI and behavioral issues at the secondary level that we can share; perhaps someone in our audience could help us with this one.

There may be some helpful information for you at the [OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports Web site](#). They have a monograph from 2004 with very relevant chapters for high schools. For example, see the chapters on "Data-Based Decision Making for High Schools Implementing Positive Behavior Support" and "Use of Targeted Group Interventions in High Schools." In addition you may want to download "[The Current Status and Future Directions of School-Based Behavioral Interventions](#)" by Frank Gresham in the *School Psychology Review*.

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Question from **D Ryan, Mother:**

Does a child need to be failing for RTI to be initiated? For example, if a child continually does poorly on math computation but the grade is higher due to homework, participation, and other aspects of math, can this child be eligible for RTI.

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

Tier I of RTI involves two important components: (1) High quality instruction in the general education classroom, and (2) Screening or other means of identifying students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. If your son is struggling with math computation, instructional supports should be put in place to help him. Granted, schools will have different approaches to identifying struggling students, so you should talk with your school to find out how they're providing supports and to whom. A helpful resource for you would be "A Parent's Guide to Response-to-Intervention" which you can download.

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Question from **Ellie Fosmire, Fulton-Montgomery community College:**

I am interested in the effect that RTI will have on the documentation process. I work with students who

have an LD designation and currently depend on the psycho-educational testing to guide me in making appropriate accommodations at the junior college level. How will I know the important information currently provided to me by the WAIS and Woodcock Johnson?

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

You raise a very important issue. Federal legislation makes it clear that no sole criterion may be used for determining eligibility for special education and related services, including identification of specific learning disabilities. That means that RTI does not replace the need for a comprehensive evaluation. So you should continue to get information from standardized tests. However, RTI can be a very important part of that comprehensive evaluation.

The data from a student's response to instruction can provide valuable information about the student's strengths and weaknesses and learning needs. Those data should be part of the student's records and be available for you when you make accommodation decisions.

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Question from **Ms. Fine, Special Ed Teacher (LD):**

What do you do when secondary teachers refuse to participate in RTI, and when they refuse to even differentiate their class work, even when they have signed a contract indicating that they will do it as part of their daily planning?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

Some of my favorite people are secondary teachers! Most of these folks are not in the profession for the money! They tend to love their respective subjects and feel passionate about teaching their content. (And let's not forget that their feet are held to the fire of state standards!) If secondary teachers think that by "differentiating" class work they are watering down their curriculum, they won't do it. Many of them may not know how to differentiate instruction and maintain the rigor of their curriculum.

Professional development is the key ? but especially at the secondary level PD activities have to be worthwhile; i.e., immediately useful to teachers. Secondary teachers have little tolerance for time away from planning or instruction that doesn't directly help them in their teaching.

My experience in this arena leads me to recommend that PD in differentiated instruction be done within, rather than across subject areas so that, for example, math teachers can learn specific activities relevant to their disciplines, etc.

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Question from **Melissa Ferrell, consultant, Ky Dept of Ed:**

How do you address the issues regarding the redefining of staff roles within a tiered service delivery

model at the middle/high school level? How will our ideas about collaboration be redefined or expanded within this model?

**Dr. Kathy Whitmire:**

This is an excellent question. RTI provides an opportunity to bring together the expertise of both regular education and special education, pooling the joint knowledge of teachers and related service providers to work both with and on behalf of students. This does indeed require redefining roles. RTI is truly team-based and collaborative. As we all know, this requires administrative support to deploy staff resources in a way that allows for joint planning. Schedules must include activities, not just lists of students' names. Thinking must be focused on workloads, not caseloads or class sizes. The pay-offs are tremendous, as team-based problem-solving results in efficient and informed programming for struggling students as early as possible.

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Question from **Pauline Vektor, Dyslexia Specialist, Galena Park ISD TX:**

What length of time is recommended for interventions for secondary students? We know research states it will be more time intensive as students get older, is there a difference in what a 6th grader needs and what an 11th grader would need time wise if all other concerns were equal?

**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

A reframing of this question might be, "How long before we know if a student is responsive to intervention?" (BTW, the idea that we are gauging students' "responsiveness" to intervention, not just their "response" is why I prefer the term "Responsiveness to Intervention."). Students should get what they need wherever and from whomever is appropriate. In a good RTI system, the length of time will vary and perhaps not so much with a grade level but with individual students. Movement across tiers has to be fluid.

An important practical consideration for me as a former school district administrator is how much "intensive" and "individualized" intervention a school system should give a student before considering this "specialized instruction." In Utopia, where we wouldn't have to worry about funding, none of this would matter. We would have all the money in the world to create interesting delivery systems without structural constraints. However, in the real world most systems will have to fund intensive, individualized work with students with special education dollars. So the length of time within tiers has tremendous implications to a district in terms of funding services.

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Question from **Tom Owen, School Psychologist, Sweetwater Middle:**

As a school psychologist in a system that is just embarking down the RTI trail, what tips do you have for successful implementation in our first year? Pitfalls we should avoid? Thanks!

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**Dr. Barbara Ehren:**

Like any venture, the pitfalls are numerous. Here are my top two:

1. Placing general educators in the back seat in the vehicle going down the RTI road. If you have been around long enough to remember the REI movement (Regular Education Initiative) you will recall that it was gened in name only. It never really produced the results we had desired. Let's not make that same mistake with RTI. So if your system is at the beginning of the road, get gened in the driver's seat. Get a big van and make sure the leadership group involves all stakeholders, including building level administrators, families, the community, and students.
  2. Conceptualizing secondary RTI models as elementary models for older students (or in districts with existing RTI models, exporting the elementary model to middle and high school). We already made that mistake in the early days of providing special education services; let's not do it again with RTI! The organizational structures of middle, junior, and high school and the corresponding setting demands require that we create RTI models unique to those respective settings (and yes the high school version needs to differ from the middle school or junior high version).
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**Sheldon Horowitz, Director of Professional Services (Moderator):**

Before we adjourn today's chat, I want to encourage our readers to visit [NCLD's LD InfoZone](#) and become familiar with the many RTI resources that are posted (and updated) on regular basis.

I also want to announce that NCLD is leading a new national initiative, the RTI Action Network, funded by the Cisco Systems Foundation. The [RTI Action Network Web site](#) is scheduled to launch in spring 2008. Visit [LD.org](#) for announcements about the launch and for helpful information and networking opportunities.

In the interim, NCLD welcomes your feedback, questions and comments about RTI, as well as suggestions for topics you'd like to see highlighted on the new RTI Action Network Web site. Please feel free to contact us at [programs@ncl.org](mailto:programs@ncl.org).

That concludes our discussion for today. Thanks to everyone for the thoughtful questions and thanks to our experts, Dr. Kathleen Whitmire and Dr. Barbara Ehren, for their time today. A transcript of this LD Talk will be made available shortly.

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**The Fine Print**

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