Special Education Within An RTI Framework
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About this Talk
Join Ann Casey and Bob Heimbaugh during our next RTI Talk as they answer your questions about the special educator's role within an RTI framework. Dr. Casey and Mr. Heimbaugh will also offer tips on implementing RTI based on lessons they have learned through their extensive experience working in schools to help as many students as possible get what they need.

Transcript

Q Laney
Is RTI a special education initiative? Does it apply to students in general education?

A Ann
It definitely applies to general education! We like to think about it as a framework for how high quality education is provided to all students, including student with disabilities. This framework suggests that all students sometimes need additional or more targeted, explicit instruction to learn a particular skill. RTI provides a framework of tiered support so that students can receive this kind of support when needed.

A Bob Heimbaugh
The instructional concepts found in RtI have been around for many years. The changes in IDEA 97 and IDEA 2004 began to support a change in thinking about instructional support for all students. Both IDEA 97 and IDEA 2004 support the movement from two separate, parallel systems (regular education vs. special education) to one system of support that encompasses all students. Ironically, the term "Response to Intervention" is not found in either law. RtI is and always should be considered a school initiative that is developed around an increasing degree of time, support, and instruction that enables all students to be successful in a school. It takes everyone in a school to rally around high-quality, systematic instruction. RtI is neither a special education nor a general education initiative. In my book it is just "good instruction."

Q Kay York
What is a speech and language pathologist legally allowed and expected to do during the RTI process? How could/should speech pathologists get credited time for the RTI minutes/hours spent since the child is not yet qualified?

A Bob Heimbaugh
Both of these questions are good questions. In reflecting on how to respond to your questions, I
Ann

The answer to your first question is that it depends?it depends on your state and guidelines for how special education staff time can be spent. Funding of special education staff is quite complicated and varies greatly from state to state, so we are not able to comment specifically on your situation. IDEIA has always supported service in the least restrictive environment, which can mean that services are provided in the general education setting. Collaboration with general education staff is a means to supporting this goal. In addition, our experience is that SLPs can be of great assistance in helping general education staff develop good interventions for students struggling with language concepts, vocabulary, and phonemic awareness?to name a few. You seem to have a concern that suggests you have to account for how your time is spent. If this is the case, I would address these questions to those who are asking you for an accounting.

Jen OBrien

What is an appropriate amount of time to try RTI with students?

Ann

This is a good question that isn't answered easily. It really depends upon the actual intervention being provided, the student, and the amount of progress the student is making/not making. What we don't want to happen is for students to 'linger' in an intervention, where no one is looking at student progress data. Some states where RTI is used as part of a process for determining eligibility for LD services require a certain number of data points or number of weeks in an intervention prior to referring. While these are attempts to ensure that students don't linger in an intervention that is ineffective, really the best solution is to have a team who collects progress data frequently and changes the intervention when a student's progress is not improving. A team that uses a good problem-solving process and matches interventions to hypothesized needs is going to have the best idea about the length of time a student should have a tiered support before trying something different or referring for special education evaluation.

Bob Heimbaugh

RTI is a system of support that takes years to develop and implement. As someone who has been involved in RTI development and implementation for the past 7 years, I can honestly say I have come to the conclusion that I will never arrive regarding all of the things I have learned and will continue to learn around RTI. When talking with many professionals over the years, RTI has been described by many as a "program." It is not a program. It is a framework of systematic support that
centers on high-quality instruction, organized assessments, professional development and research based program implementation. So? "How long should you try RtI in your school?" In my opinion? as long as it takes.

Ellen Fisk
As a special educator, I wonder about the parameters of my role within the RTI framework--especially as I have been co-teaching more and more. How much help should I be offering to my general education colleagues?

Ann
Co-teaching can be a great model for both special and general education students. Different states have different parameters about the degree to which special educators can work with general education students. So, when in doubt, ask your Special Education Director. But your question was about supporting general education colleagues. Special educators must work with general colleagues to ensure that students with disabilities are receiving the accommodations and modifications needed to be successful in the general education classroom.

Often these supports are good for all students - not just students with disabilities. In fact, the concept of universal design for learning (UDL) is receiving renewed interest as RTI becomes more prevalent. UDL asks general educators to prepare their lessons in such a way that all students can learn the big ideas or concepts being presented. Thus, supporting your colleagues should have positive benefit for your students.

Bob Heimbaugh
As a school using the RtI framework, decisions about roles and responsibilities within the framework should be made at the leadership team level. As the framework is implemented over time, a cultural shift will occur in which the parameters become more clearly defined. Using a team approach, you will collaborate around the needs of the students you all serve.

Kelly Pierce
When I notice that students are struggling, should I step in or do I need to wait for them to be brought to the team?

Ann
One of tenets of RTI is to avoid failure and intervene early. Thus, struggling students should get the support they need when they need it. It is difficult to comment specifically about how you would go about this without knowing the process you have in place in your building. If there is a clear process, then that's a good place to start. But, for example, if you are the teacher with the struggling student, and your team doesn't meet formally for 3 more weeks, this does not preclude...
you from doing some informal assessment to see if you can't better identify concepts and/or skills with which the student is having difficulty. If your informal assessment provides a clear picture, then you can try some different approaches within your classroom - differentiate for this student. Then when your team does meet, you will have additional data that should help your team in determining what action should be taken next.

**Ann**

I think there are a variety of roles that special educators might play. Because this framework is meant to address all students' needs, it really is best when there is collaboration across all departments and roles in a school when the framework is being built. Special educators often are some of the staff who are most well-versed in collecting frequent performance data and using it to make instruction decisions—a hallmark of RTI. Another way to be involved is to provide support in the development of tiered instruction. Again, special educators have expertise in working with small groups of students with similar needs and matching interventions to these needs. You might be helpful in designing schedules for tiered instruction. These are just a few ways to be involved, but by all means, do involve yourself! Good luck in the planning process.

**Bob Heimbaugh**

The special educators' role in RTI at your school should be the same as any other educator in your school—as a team member who helps in making decisions about and supporting RtI at all levels of the school. Every teacher in a school brings a critical piece of expertise to the table when planning for systematic support across multiple tiers of support. The special education program needs to be integrated into the RtI framework. Special education teachers (as with all teachers) are heavily involved in determining appropriate interventions, support of the core curriculum, collaboration and problem solving, and instructional delivery (usually at Tier 3).

**Edie Simons**

Can students who are receiving special education services be included in an RTI framework?

**Bob Heimbaugh**

Yes they can! The beauty of the RtI process is that it provides the gift of time - instructional time that is. All students in the RtI model are exposed to the core curriculum. Instruction in the core can run from 60 to 90 minutes, depending on how the RtI process is implemented in a school. Along with the 60-90 minutes that all students are exposed to the core curriculum, special education students may also be provided intervention instruction to support and develop academic skills.
based on the school assessments. Student growth is progress monitored through a criterion-referenced assessment that is aligned to district and state learning targets and standards. The feedback from the progress monitoring (which is done weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) provides feedback in two ways: 1) instructionally and 2) academically. From the data collected, teachers determine if the intervention is having an impact on student learning.

Ken Prentis
Our elementary school has very limited resources. How can we most effectively utilize the special education staff in the building?

Ann
Limited resources seem to be a challenge many of us are facing around the country and clearly schools who do not have Title I funding have additional challenges, if there are not other resources that can be relied upon. I would like to change your question a bit, however. Limited resources should not necessarily mean that the only way to provide intervention is with special education staff. In some schools, interventions are provided by general education teachers. Some schools are successfully organizing in ways that allow one teacher to work with a small group of students to deliver an intervention while that teacher’s teammates divide the remaining group of students among themselves during that time.

Many schools have access to volunteers. Volunteers, in general, are not skilled in providing high quality intervention. However, with enough planning, and sometimes support from the philanthropic community, a cadre of ‘volunteers’ can be trained to provide a few quality interventions that meet a group of students’ needs - saving the more precious resource of a highly skilled specialist to work with the students who are struggling the most.

We have to be creative if we are serious about meeting the needs of all our students. It won't be easy, but it will be very rewarding.

Laura Trent
What can the principal do to encourage special education staff to work with students who do not have IEPs? They seem to want all students to be identified for special education services before intervening.

Ann
As a school leader, presumably you would be involved in working with your special education team to define how services are delivered. This may be determined at the district level, however, but there should be room for variation as different students need different kinds of support. The degree to which your special education staff can provide direct service to students who do not have IEPs is
generally determined by the state in which you live. Some states have more rigid rules than others. If you need to know the specific rules in your state, then I would suggest consulting with your director of special education.

However, we believe the spirit and intent of both ESEA and IDEIA is for collaboration to occur so that all students receive the amount and kind of support necessary to be successful. We believe that if a special education teacher is providing a small group intervention to students already identified and a general education student is in need of the same kind of support, that it could be a reasonable idea to include that student in the group. However, it would be important that the addition of this student not detract from the services of the already-identified students. You would want to check your state guidelines about these issues to ensure that all rules and regulations are being followed.

**Bob Heimbaugh**

Without the full support of the principal, RtI implementation will probably go nowhere. The principal, in conjunction with the building leadership team, must establish a culture of collaboration, team-building, problem solving, and norms to set the right direction in a school. These parameters should be based on the schools’ central Vision and Mission. If the special education teachers are only working with special education students, then one of three things are possibly occurring:

1. All states have special education policies and procedures. The policies and procedures of your state may have strict guidelines as to the use of special education funding that may limit special education teacher involvement.
2. The school has not developed a strong vision for RtI implementation. Therefore implementation is occurring, but the roles and responsibilities in the school have not been well defined so the special education teachers are holding on to the current culture of instructional support, or
3. The principal is not supporting the RtI implementation process in the school.

**Keith Oldham**

Since our school adopted an RTI framework, many interventions have been tried before a student is identified for special education and I’m not sure what else to do for them. Where can I find interventions that work for the bottom 5%?

**Ann**

It sounds like your school in well into implementing the RTI framework. You've identified a concern that hasn't been well articulated in much of the literature about RTI. What does a special education teacher do for students when they have already received high quality interventions that have been delivered with fidelity, but still have not made the kind of progress expected? Typically, students in this situation need the most explicit and systematic approaches that are available and matched to their needs. These students have not responded as the team was hoping and now the special education team is left to find a better match.
As you have identified, this is not easy and, in reality, interventions are not labeled as 'special ed' or 'general ed' interventions. Thus, I believe that the future of special education instruction in an RTI framework will become what both Deno and Fuchs have referred to as 'experimental teaching.' Experimental teaching is a model of continually monitoring progress and making changes to instruction when students don't reduce the gap between their current progress and their goal line.

Bob Heimbaugh
When establishing the RtI framework in a school, a school needs to develop a protocol that everyone uses to make decisions about students. Using a problem solving model, one of the criteria that needs to be addressed is how a referral for special education will be determined. Determining the frequency of progress monitoring, the duration of the intervention, and the frequency of intervention all play into the decision. In my school, if a student does not make progress on three consecutive progress monitoring data points, the team decides either to, 1) continue the intervention and increase the time, 2) change the intervention, or 3) refer the student for special education if multiple interventions have been tried with no success.

Teresa McFadden
As a Special Educator in a secondary school, I am concerned about the motivation of students to work, and how RTI will differentiate between students who choose not to progress, and those who require additional help to progress. Also, there is no time built into the current daily schedule to "pull" kids for additional help. Shouldn't a "disability" have been identified prior to high school? Current practices within RTI do not work beyond middle school if you ask me. How do we adapt the practices for secondary schools?

Ann
Secondary schools are more complex due to size and the need to gain credits and meet high stakes outcomes - to graduate! So while RTI in High School is not easy, we would argue that it isn't an easy task at any grade-level configuration. There are a number of high schools around the country who are successfully implementing RTI. RTI implementation requires leadership and staff commitment to ensure that all students are making progress. High schools, unfortunately, have a number of students who are disengaged in the learning process. We think there are a number of reasons for this - and one that's particularly important to consider is that many students have experienced failure in the past. These students have a history of struggling.

Other students who are not engaged may have the skills to succeed, but find their classroom experiences not to be challenging or interesting enough to capture their attention. Thus, a teacher's task is not only to teach the content, but to find ways to teach it that meet a wide variety of students' needs. Finding a way to motivate students is a prerequisite for learning to take place. It takes a school culture where finding ways to engage all students is everyone's job to turn this around. You are also correct that a high school schedule can be a detriment to implementing RTI. And that's why schools need strong leadership so that the school schedule is designed to meet
students' needs - rather than designing a schedule and trying to fit students into it.

**Teresa McFadden**

I do not have time to prep for 4 classes, collaborate and modify for 2 additional classes, and perform my duties as Student Assistance Team coordinator. How am I to find time to now assist "general" students as well as complete all of the paperwork and required to complete my standing Special Education duties? I imagine that the paperwork load associated with RTI will be ridiculous.

**Ann**

The over emphasis on paperwork is a big concern by many. The emphasis, of course, should be on the instructional support that is provided. Special education teachers around the country have voiced a concern about the amount of due process paper work required for identification and provision of special education services. Given that we live in an era of accountability, I would argue that we need to use technology better to accomplish this need for accountability. We don't see RTI as a framework that requires special education teachers to be the "keepers of the paperwork." There should be a great deal of data collected by general education teachers prior to a student ever being considered for special education evaluation in an RTI framework. Hopefully, these data are not actual pieces of paper, but kept in a data warehouse that allows all staff to view student performance on all data collected over time.

If special education teachers continue to be the only source of intervention support in a school, then we have failed in the efforts to change things through the RTI framework. The idea is that more students get intervention support earlier so that special education might be unnecessary. In order to do this, all staff will need to become more skilled in differentiating and providing additional supportive interventions when student data indicate the need.

**Darene Sutter**

What is so special about special education services? How do we stay away from sending students to a special education classroom just because they don't "fit in" the general education classroom? How do we avoid this drop off zone and begin educating special education students based on their needs?

**Bob Heimbaugh**

This is an excellent question. Basically, to move from the "drop off zone" to which you refer to a model in which everyone belongs, a lot of training needs to occur. The beauty of RtI is that the school has a framework where students are receiving instruction in the core for a portion of the day, and at other times students are grouped and receive instruction at their instructional level based on school data. These groups may include special education students, Title I students, students not identified for services, ELL students, etc. Basically, RtI is a cultural shift from isolation
to collaboration. All teachers meet and discuss and plan around all students.

**Ann**
The IEP is what makes special education 'special' as it is a document that entitles a student to a particular set of services based on identified needs. However, there is nothing unique about the interventions special educators provide to their students. The key to intervention support, be it in general education or special education, is that the intervention is well-matched to the student's needs and has an evidence base to suggest that it is an intervention that will likely benefit the identified need. We avoid sending students to special education by providing a well developed tiered intervention system and requiring that student data assessing needs drive the amount and kind of services a student receives. Making data-based decisions is a switch for some schools, but the key to successful transformation to an RTI system.

**Darene Sutter**
What types of interventions should be used with students in Tier III that receive special education services with regards to different disabilities? (For example, Learning disability in the area of reading comprehension or written expression)

**Bob Heimbaugh**
Once a student is identified as a student with a disability, the focus for interventions should come from a multitude of sources. Here is where I would suggest you start as you identify interventions:

- Start with the student's present level of performance (PLOP). A well written PLOP statement helps to determine annual goals and, from the annual goals, appropriate instruction can be determined. Each annual goal should be measurable and a baseline should be determined.
- In IDEA 2004 there is a lot of language that states that we must use "research-based best practices." For any disability, a research-based instructional method should be used. The best place to find information on interventions that have research behind them is the ["What Works Clearinghouse" Web site.](https://www.whatworks.clearinghouse.gov/)
- If an RtI model is used in your school, a lot of data should be available to you. The screening, district, state and other diagnostic assessment data should help you identify skills of instructional focus. Take time to align the identified skills to intervention programs and group students accordingly.

**Ann**
Part of RTI is collecting a variety of student performance data over time. Between these data and the special education evaluation process, you should have a fairly good idea of the students' specific skill deficits and needs. Hopefully, you have used a problem solving process and completed a thorough problem analysis that has led the team to hypothesize what interventions are most likely to address the student's needs. As stated in other questions, Tier 3 interventions may not necessarily be different than special education interventions. In the case where a student
is receiving both services, then you would need to be specific in the IEP about what constitutes the special education services. Does the student get a double dose of the same intervention? Do they get more explicit instruction of same or similar intervention? Do they get to learn an additional strategy that may help master the underlying skill? Do they get accommodations or modifications in general education that will make it more likely that the student with the IEP will be successful?

Cara Kraft

How can school psychologists and special educators collaborate to improve RTI in their districts?

Ann

Great question. Special educators have great skills that can benefit their school and district in RTI implementation. In particular, special educators know interventions. They know how to group students to provide intervention support. In addition, special educators have good skills in collecting data on a frequent basis and using data to make instructional decisions, including changing the intervention when student performance is not increasing. In addition, special educators are used to working in a cross-disciplinary team. All these skills are quite useful in increasing collaboration with general education staff. It needs to be true collaboration, however. We can share what we have learned, but we need to listen to how it might be adapted to this broader audience.

William Cunningham

Does a resource exist that lists RTI researched based alternative curriculum that impartially reviews these tools and shows what works as best practice with valid data? I find it difficult to sort through the persuasive advertising that so often frames these products as the best tool to use for RTI.

Bob Heimbaugh

Here are some suggestions:

- What Works Clearing House
- Center on Instruction
- Intervention Central
- RTI Action Network
- Best Evidence Encyclopedia

Ann

In addition to the resources Bob mentioned, you could check the Master Inventory (of evidenced based practices) compiled by schools who participated in the MN RTI Center.
Gail Mitchell
We are using an RTI model with three tiers, then special education on the advice of an "expert". Is this a practical approach?

Ann
A three-tiered model is the most common model in RTI but that doesn't mean it is the only way to conceptualize the framework. So "yes," it can be practical. I like to advocate, regardless of the number of tiers, that the framework used includes all students, including special education students. Or to say it another way, I don't like seeing special education outside the RTI framework as we are working toward one unified system of support.

PKivett
It seems that the implementation of RtI in our school has just shifted the responsibility of intervening with students to the regular ed teachers. We are losing special education staff because of the decline of sped students. While it is good to address all needs of students, it seems that this is a way to shift funding.........

Bob Heimbaugh
Truly, this is wonderful news. As a special education teacher myself, I always took the approach that "I am working myself out of a job." We want all students to be served in the least restrictive environment, not just special education students. If your school is seeing a reduction in special education referrals, it is probably because the teachers in your school have become more responsive to the needs of the students in their classrooms. This has probably been the result of great professional development and training.

Cheri Sullivan
If a child already has an IEP can you still do RTI? If so, how do you write it into the IEP? If you think RTI will meet the need can you determine him ineligible because now the school is offering a tiered approach that will meet the need so it's no longer special education? Thanks

Bob Heimbaugh
Definitely! Writing RtI into the IEP is dependent on a state's policy and procedures around Special Education service determination. RtI services in my state are delivered as an indirect service. Special education services that address the student IEP goals are written into the IEP, but a special education teacher in my school may be delivering indirect services during core instructional time. Special education under IDEA is defined as "specialized instruction." This specialized instruction is aligned to an IEP annual goal. This specialized instruction occurs outside of core instructional time.
as determined in the student IEP. Based on the research around RtI, the more exposure a student has to instruction, the more successful they will be. That is why exposure to the core is so important.

Cheri Sullivan
What type of professional has to deliver RTI if the student has an IEP? Does the individual have to meet a higher criteria/credential then the general ed RTI?

Ann
If a student is receiving special education direct services identified on their IEP, then these services are provided by a special educator. But most students with IEPs spend a great deal of the day in general education and these services would be provided by general education staff. Think of RTI as one system that includes core curriculum and intervention support, and also includes special education for students who qualify and need more support. In the past, these have often been thought of as 2 separate systems. One of the intents of RTI is to have one unified system of support with students who need ongoing, intensive support being supported through the IEP process.

C. S.
How do you write RTI into an IEP? I understand it's use in the evaluation process, but what if you have a child who has an IEP already and the team believes he will benefit from Tier 3 strategies? Do you state that it's RTI in the goal or just go ahead and use the approach? And can he be with typical kids who are in the group getting RTI but may not have IEPs?

Ann
It’s difficult to comment specifically, as your state may have guidelines about this. However, it seems that you potentially could address Tier 3 services either in the accommodations/modifications sections of the IEP or perhaps, in the LRE statement. I don't think you would mention RTI in a goal statement - goals should be about the skill area and the kind of progress expected for the year. Yes, students with IEPs can be with general education students. This has always been the case.

Bob Heimbaugh
If the intervention is aligned to an IEP goal, then yes, it can be written into the IEP. How the services and instruction are delivered is dependent on least restrictive environment determination and placement considerations. If the team decides that a Tier 3 strategy is best and the team determines that this is the least restrictive environment for the student, then the team must be sure to monitor student goal progress.
That concludes our RTI Talk for today. Thanks to everyone for the thoughtful questions and thanks to our experts, Dr. Ann Casey and Mr. Bob Heimbaugh, for their time today.

Please also take a few moments at the completion of this event to give us your feedback by taking our survey!

Related Reading from RTINetwork.org:

- Myths About Response to Intervention (RTI) Implementation by Bill East
- Tiered Instruction and Intervention in a Response-to-Intervention Model by Edward S. Shapiro, Ph.D.
- Considering Tier 3 Within a Response-to-Intervention Model by Ruth A. Ervin, Ph.D.

Additional Resources:

- National Association of State Directors of Special Education
- National Center on Response to Intervention