



Reading Teachers Play Key Role in Successful Response to Intervention Approaches

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As it is used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the term **response to intervention**, or RTI, introduces a new approach that will allow struggling students to receive effective reading interventions early, an alternative to the “wait-to-fail” model currently in practice. RTI is an effort to address the significant percentage of students — up to 40 percent, according to President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education — whose reading problems place them in special education classes.

The endorsement of RTI in the IDEA legislation reflects the good results achieved by programs throughout the United States that emphasize collaboration. Ogden Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas is a Title I school that in 1996-1997 had a special education referral rate of 25 percent. Barb Tierney, a reading specialist who became principal that year, initiated an early intervention approach the following school year that embodies RTI concepts — a complete professional alliance, including commingling of funds and sharing of professional expertise among the principal, teachers in special education, Title I, and general education, and the social worker.

Says former Ogden Elementary special education teacher Pam Russell, “Teachers working collaboratively, kids discussed as individuals, deciding what each child needs — it was great fun.” It was also hard work, but the results were indisputable. The special education referrals dropped first to around 12 percent and, by the year 2000-2001, plummeted to 9 percent.

The success of programs in schools such as Ogden led Congress to include RTI provisions in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA (PL 108-446) that will become effective July 1, 2005. The goal of RTI is to reduce the number of children entering special education because of unaddressed reading problems by requiring early screening and intense collaborative intervention.

Hastening Implementation of RTI in Your School

Many schools have already developed sensible, effective intervention programs. As is clear from the examples below, successful RTI-type programs rely on the leadership of a strong principal or designated leader who has budgetary power and the ability to bring special education, Title I, reading specialists, and general educators to the same table to share professional development, time, space, money, and curriculum resources. The sharing of resources is sometimes a stumbling block, yet strong designated school leaders are able to keep the focus on the children being helped and the pride the teaching profession can have in a job well done.

IRA members can begin the RTI process by sharing with principals the benefits of an RTI-type approach and the support offered through IDEA. The chief financial incentive is that 15 percent of a school's special education funds can be used to launch the RTI process. These efforts may include reading professional development for general education and special education personnel.

Typical Challenges to Implementing RTI

Many special education teachers are concerned that an approach like RTI will add non-special education children to their already full roster. Others fear that some children will be misdiagnosed as not needing special education referral when they actually do. Some will also be concerned that the new IDEA allows 15 percent of special education funds to be used for RTI services, including professional development for general education and reading teachers to help them better serve the at-risk population.

Says Pam Russell, former special education teacher at Ogden Elementary and now Executive Director of Special Education and Student Support Services for United School District 383 Manhattan-Ogden Schools:

“I am very excited about the notion of early intervention for prevention of full evaluations for SPED [special education] services. Our evaluation teams would be glad to have fewer evaluations. But those same teams have expressed great concern about ‘opening the floodgates’ to every child who needs a little more help. The idea that... non-SPED students could get some services scares them. They feel they are busy enough with the SPED kids.”

Pam Russell faced those territorial concerns when at Ogden Elementary School in 1997 and decided that as a special education teacher she was glad to add more children to her reading or math groups. “It seems to me that helping those children early would pay off more in the long run. And the results were remarkable!” Her school tallied up fewer discipline problems and significant reading and math progress.

Russell notes that for an RTI system to work, teachers need to trust each other and develop a communication system. “Sometimes Title I reading teachers would be working with special education students and sometimes the special education teachers would be working with Title I students.”

“It's really a territorial thing — my kids and your kids. ‘You can't possibly do things as well as I do and if you say the kid is making progress — well, that must mean you are fudging on the evaluation or something.’ You must have a true team — not just groups of teachers. It takes a lot of work to get the teachers to blend services.”

Another challenge that IDEA’s RTI initiative hopes to address is imbedding early intervention in the school culture so that it remains after initiators retire or move on. Unfortunately, Ogden’s successful collaborative approach was not codified within the school culture. When the principal and some team members moved on, the school drifted back to a more traditional grade-level pull-out system and special education referrals again climbed.

Examples of Successful RTI-type Programs

Ogden Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas

Ogden Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas is a Title I school that in 1996-1997 had a special education referral rate of 25 percent. Barb Tierney, a reading specialist who became principal that year, initiated an early intervention approach the following year that embodies the concepts of RTI. Pam Russell, the special education teacher at the time, recalls the plan they used:

“The year began and ended with reading inventories for all children in the school. Children were grouped by reading levels in inclusive multi-aged groups. The special education teacher took charge of the lowest groups of children. The Title I teacher took charge of the next level. The classroom teachers (and student teachers) took the highest groups. The library aide and paraeducators would help with these groups.”

The students had one-hour sessions of small-group learning focusing on specific reading skills, making sure every student was making progress. Groups were fluid and students would move up when they tested ready.

The teachers chose themes that were used across content areas and grade levels. A significant part of Pam Russell’s job as special education teacher was to share with regular education and reading teachers behavioral strategies to help at-risk children be better learners.

Says Russell,

“We created behavior systems that encouraged positive behaviors. We kept reading records in small groups to identify errors and fluency levels on individuals, data collection to determine types of reading errors, and comprehension problems. We noted each child’s topics of interest. Doing this student by student became manageable, not a nightmare. We also tied in writing because we know if kids see it, say it, and write it, it might stick in their little brains better. We made books — stories they wrote themselves — tied to the theme. I really believe our special education numbers were lower because all teachers worked together to help each child develop better social behaviors conducive to learning.”

Barb Tierney, former principal of Ogden Elementary School, shares her experience on initiating the RTI-type process at Ogden in 1997:

“We followed the Kansas State School Improvement Team plan that required us to involve parents, do reading assessments at the beginning and end of the year, create a comprehensive professional development plan, and set aside collaborative teacher planning time. In addition to pre- and post-testing we did ongoing reading inventories every six weeks.

“We created a long-range professional development plan that emphasized reading instruction and we required all teachers on staff to participate. In addition to specific strategies to implement scientifically based reading principles — including decoding, reading fluency and comprehension — teachers were taught strategies to deal with behavior problems, encourage parental involvement, and reward success. We were able to combine funds from Title I and other resources to pay for professional development. We included strategies and positive reinforcements to improve not only reading, but general academics, math, writing, studying and organization, classroom management, and behavior.”

A sampling of the reading inventories still in use in the Manhattan-Ogden schools includes Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI -II) 2nd - 5th; Metropolitan Achievement Test (3rd grade); Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) - 6th – 9th; and CTB/McGraw Hill’s Language Assessment System (LAS) for English language learners.

El Rancho Unified School District in Pico Rivera, California

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Thirty-four percent of El Rancho Unified School District students are second language learners. Barbara Moore-Brown, director of special and alternative education in the El Rancho school district, and Judy Montgomery, professor of special education and literacy

at Chapman University in Orange, California, coordinated to create an RTI process for El Rancho. For several years prior to the 2002 RTI implementation, the district's special education department worked to develop assessments appropriate for this culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Formal pre- and post-testing consists of the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE), AGS Publishing (Williams, 2001).

Montgomery noted in an interview for the *ASHA Leader*, "I began to think that we could develop a program that took all the best strategies and deliver intensive services every day — delivering services two or three times a week is not enough to change learning styles."

Montgomery's RTI interventions are based on Put Reading First (Armbruster & Osborne, 2001) which consists of nine weeks of one-hour daily instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, vocabulary development, fluency, and text comprehension. They developed 17 activities that guarantee instruction and daily practice in each of the five areas of reading. The RTI program in El Rancho targets fourth- and fifth-grade students who were just about to be referred for special education assessment. These students are struggling readers for whom interventions in the general education program have failed.

District general educators, reading teachers, special education resource specialists, along with the speech-language pathologist are part of the RTI team. At the end of the nine-week, one-hour-per-day program, students have received 45 hours of intense, systematic, scientifically based reading instruction in small groups. Results from the program are impressive.

One hundred twenty-three fourth- and fifth-graders who lagged two to three years in reading have demonstrated statistically significant improvement as measured by GRADE with gains representing more than a year's reading level growth in just nine weeks. These students have also improved on statewide assessments. Most gratifying is that over two years, of the 123 students who participated in the program, only eight, or about six percent, have been identified as special education students.

In December 2004, El Rancho's RTI program was recognized with the California School Boards Association's Golden Bell Award. The principals have been so happy with the program that they requested Moore-Brown and Montgomery to modify it for use in summer school as a whole class format involving reading teachers and general education teachers. The district's Reading First coaches will help conduct the teacher training and assessments for the summer school program.

Moore-Brown notes that it is critical for reading teachers and general education teachers to know that RTI creates greater expectations for them to provide interventions prior to referring students for special education assessments.

Reading First Coordinator Roberta Gonzalez adds,

“Struggling readers do not become the responsibility of a resource specialist; rather, all teachers of reading draw upon their professional knowledge and skills to ensure that even the most struggling reader receives a quality instructional program that will help him/her succeed. Perhaps most importantly, implementation of the RTI program necessitates a paradigm shift in how reading teachers approach instruction for struggling readers. All too often, there is a tendency to slow down instruction for students that are experiencing difficulty with learning to read. RTI recognizes the importance of maintaining a rigorous instructional pace for these students. By moving through the 17 program activities in an hour, the reading teacher ensures that students remain engaged in sufficient learning experiences to progress in their reading skills and abilities.”

Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, Oakland County, Michigan

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To implement Walled Lake’s RTI version, the Seamless Support Model, nine Reading Recovery (RR) teachers replaced 28 paraeducators in three Title I schools. These RR teachers are part of a coordinated teaching effort among principals, counselors, general educators, special education teachers, and ESL staff.

The school system began replacing the Title I funded paraeducators with RR teachers in 2002-2003. By 2003-2004 the RR teachers were targeting the lowest third of first-grade students. These students have one-on-one sessions every morning, covering all five reading pillars. In the afternoons the RR teachers lead 40-minute small literacy groups composed of children in the next most-in-need tier of readers in grades K-2. Each week during block time the RR teachers work with the kindergarten through second-grade teachers to help plan targeted instruction for all K-2 students.

Susan Matz, Walled Lake’s director of instructional programs, notes that the Seamless Support Model redefines special education teachers’ roles to include helping general education students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The line between regular education and special education teachers has been largely erased; they work together and share their students.

Additionally, the model includes a part-time teacher for each school who leads Soar to Success (a reciprocal teaching program using dialogue involving summarizing, question generating, clarifying, and predicting to improve comprehension) and serves as an additional literacy intervention for third- through fifth-grade students. She works 100 days each year.

Matz notes, “By spending our dollars on intervention rather than remediation, children are receiving focused instruction when they need it so they are not unnecessarily declared handicapped.”

Positive academic results and teacher feedback during the transitional year bolstered Walled Lake's resolve continue this effort. With the program now fully functioning, the results are good. By every measure (including the California Achievement Test and the state assessments) students who had the new Seamless Support Model (including full implementation of Reading Recovery) are referred less frequently than students who had the prior Title I paraprofessional intervention. Teacher feedback is also positive. Second-grade teachers immediately commented that it was amazing how much more advanced their incoming students were compared to previous years.

Prior to this Seamless Support Model version of RTI, Walled Lake's three Title I schools had a special education referral rate around 10–15 students per year per school. In 2003–2004 the special education referrals ranged from 0–3 students. More importantly, with the new Seamless Support Model, each school was able to reclassify many learning disabled children as regular education students. Between 2002 and 2004 the percentage of students classified as special education students dropped in each of the three Title I schools by 15 percent, 53 percent, and 44 percent respectively.

Pella Community School District, Iowa

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Alarming statistics on how ill prepared at-risk kindergarten children are to learn reading motivated Pella to revamp its reading program to the more encompassing RTI approach. Pella focused on diagnostic interventions to improve students' reading fluency and meet their comprehension needs. Of special concern were readers who were slightly behind in their development, but rarely qualified to receive assistance until they fell even further behind.

Pella began phasing in its RTI-type Comprehensive Assistance Program in 1999 to diagnose specific reading needs of each elementary student and provide precise, immediate interventions. The Pella school system's three elementary schools serve about 1000 children in total. All teachers sought to find a way improve reading learning. The program has been fully in place since 2002-2003.

Pella's program provides diagnostic information on every child each week from the first week of kindergarten through the last week of fifth grade. Interventions address all levels of need from special education through gifted students. It involves direct instruction and many helpers, including community volunteers.

Results have been impressive. Fourth grade reading proficiency levels have risen to 92 percent on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills from 84.2 percent prior to 1999. Fluency rates have risen 10 to 20 words per minute, and early literacy proficiency rates have increased 27 percent. Special education referrals have dropped.

Pella's program components

- *Assessment system* furnishes staff with “real-time” data on student progress, allowing staff to place students in the program according to testing results, before students fall significantly behind.

Pella assesses students weekly. Their evaluations include phonemic awareness (DIBELS); fluency and accuracy (DIBELS, quarterly probes); phonics (locally developed benchmark assessments); and comprehension (Gates MacGinitie, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, locally developed benchmark assessments, Accelerated Reader data, and STAR testing); and vocabulary (Gates MacGinitie, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, locally developed benchmark assessments, and STAR testing).

Pella uses DIBELS and their own system that stores and analyzes student progress data. Notes Lowell Ernst, Pella’s curriculum coordinator, “Without the access and use of real-time data there is no way to analyze individual student progress at the same time as system effectiveness.”

- *Community and parent involvement.* A “literacy army” of 150 trained volunteers provides reading assistance to individuals and groups of students. Trained pre-service teachers provide small-group literacy instruction. Community members from the hospital to the local media are involved in promoting early literacy.

Pella’s Early Literacy Mentoring Association helps make all parents aware of the importance of doing literacy activities with children from birth to age five. The Association presents educational seminars and prepares literacy kits that can be checked out from the public library.

Reaching out for community involvement helped secure parent cooperation and volunteers to move the program to greater success. The community buy-in helped Pella overcome typical challenges that included finding and training volunteers to help in “tier 1” interventions; hiring assistants; and instituting new professional development, especially for use of DIBELS and other real-time data collection efforts.

- *Adjustments for reading teachers*
Reading teachers developed — and shared with staff — strategies to match students’ unique needs. Students are instructed through one-on-one tutoring and small groups within the classroom setting. Reading teachers have increased their attention to data-based decision making and have become accustomed to a variety of people working with their students. All teachers changed their system of delivery by pulling students together with similar needs rather than similar schedules.

Notes reading teacher Angie Anthony, “My job is easier because I have more options for serving each student. Having the students grouped according to needs helps me focus on each student and concentrate on quality instruction.”

- *Transitioning to RTI*

When asked to share advice for schools wishing to implement RTI, Ernst suggested starting with the data set that you have. Says Ernst, “Ask what instructional interventions you currently have to meet each need. Once you have answered those questions you will be able to identify the gaps in services. Try to fill those gaps with everything at your disposal including community volunteers. Be ready to blur the lines between special education and regular education as these lines sometimes keep students from receiving the help that they need. Once you have the system in place, don't think your job is done. You will always be adjusting to new information.”

Sampling of Pella's RTI curriculum:

- Soar to Success - Comprehension-based intervention program for upper elementary
- Quick Reads - Comprehension and fluency and building
- Rewards - Comprehension and fluency and building
- Sunshine Books - McGraw Hill nonfiction comprehension books
- Phonemic Awareness interventions delivered by classroom teachers, Title I teachers, community volunteers, and college preservice teachers.
- Language Toolkit - General education rules of the written language that aid in student decoding and spelling ability.
- Reading Mastery - Delivered by Title I staff to students in grades one and two who need assistance in decoding, accuracy, and fluency.
- Read Naturally - Builds comprehension and fluency skills with students who benefit from building skills in practiced text.
- Literacy Army - 150 community volunteers doing phonemic awareness activities and fluency building with students one on one.
- Central Teacher Academy - Trained preservice teacher education students doing interventions with mentor teachers in an action research model.
- Corrective Reading - Explicit instruction in reading for students in grades four and five to drive home previously taught skills to the level of automaticity.
- Accelerated Reader - Guided practice to promote comprehension in an appropriate developmental zone.