



Building Literacy Bridges

Connecting RTI and High Quality Practices

Session Presented by Dr. Mary Howard

Use these twelve guidelines to ensure that your RTI bridge is structurally sound

Guideline 1: Identify User Needs

Our first responsibility is to improve student outcome (not test scores) and this can only happen by taking a close look at the needs of students in order to create learning experiences that will best address those needs. Each decision schools make must be preceded by the question, *“Is this in the best interest of those it will most directly impact (students)?”*

Guideline 2: Establish Central Goals

Using students as our guide, we must then work together to identify core values, or those things we hold dear as a school. These should be recorded beginning with two critical goals: 1) to increase volume of meaningful reading and writing; 2) to view time as a precious commodity that cannot be wasted. What we value is what will be emphasized, so be certain that you value the right things.

Guideline 3: Do Your Homework

Just as there are many types of bridges we can select according to our purpose, we must select an RTI framework by maintaining a flexible stance. Every school is unique, so a single design cannot meet the needs of all. Explore what others schools are doing but keep in mind that what is effective for one school may not be for another. Make choices to support the needs of *your* school.

Guideline 4: Survey the Site

Take a close look at what is already in place in your school as you celebrate those things and use them to maximize the bridge *you* are building. Examine what is ineffective and make the necessary adjustments to accomplish your specific goals. Identify instructionally rich practices to prioritize and alleviate those things that are not (worksheets, passive activities). We do have a choice!

Guideline 5: Research Design Rules

Create a thoughtful design as you keep the tenets of best practice in mind. Create a schedule that revolves around students with a dedicated block for tier 1 reading (minimum 90–120 minutes) and additional time above and beyond for instruction at increasing levels of intensity. Use a gradual release of responsibility model to dig deeper with supportive models for new learning (I do) that is followed by gradually relinquishing support (we do) and increasing independence (You do).

Guideline 6: Form Your Design Team

Form your design team and make schoolwide, job embedded staff development a priority. The key is for *all* teachers to work toward increasing expertise through a variety of professional learning opportunities all year to ensure we are adhering to the tenets of best practice. Offer leadership to support ongoing efforts, making sure this is an individual with a strong instructional background. Be sure to provides ongoing collaborative experiences that engage teachers in meaningful dialogue.

Guideline 7: Create Your Blueprint

Creating a rich RTI bridge is not about simply renaming what has not worked in the past, nor is it about throwing away what we have learned about high quality literacy. We have many remarkable instructional support templates such as Reading Recovery that will support our efforts to create a framework for excellence. Effective programs take professional judgment and decision-making into account rather than promoting a scripted, one-size-fits all mentality.

Guideline 8: Gather Quality Tools

Any tools used in the name of learning must have a purpose and be of the highest quality. By refusing to spend money on trivial “stuff” (ie: worksheets), we are able to opt for quality resources. Of course, we must also provide the professional development opportunities that will help teachers use these things in more efficient and effective ways.

Guideline 9: Build a Solid Foundation

An effective RTI design is virtually impossible without a high quality tier 1. Tier 1 is the first line of defense, so we must ensure that teachers consistently employ engaging, high quality instructional practices, differentiation, and targeted support. Make sure that your higher tiers of support are *in addition to* tier 1 so that they do not substitute for these things. Each tier must also be inseparably coordinated so that students who need MORE have their needs met both within and across tiers.

Guideline 10: Monitor for Quality Control

Assessment designed to improve the quality of instruction should play a central role in the literacy process. Data in the form of numbers alone, however, offers a narrow marker for learning. Good assessment can include numbers (*What?*) if critical knowledge gained from daily assessment and analysis (*What else?*) is used to drive and support more effective instruction (*So what?*).

Guideline 11: Ensure Sustainability

Lasting change is systemic, so we must work at a schoolwide level to promote longevity as we put practices into place that we can continuously build on. This is a gradual process as we identify and promote instructional and environmental adjustments in smaller increments. Change never happens overnight, so learn to pick your battles carefully and focus on what matters most.

Guideline 12: Promote Ongoing Refinement

Regularly reevaluate where you are in the change process and make adjustments as needed. It takes three to five years or more to fine tune your RTI bridge. Seek the support of experts in the field to explore your goals and determine if you are meeting those goals or what adjustments may be warranted. Making thoughtful choices from the beginning leads to fewer adjustments later.

RTI provides a solid framework for literacy, but it must be based on the tenets of best practice. The only structurally sound literacy bridge is one that connects RTI with high quality literacy practices.

How structurally sound is your literacy bridge?

