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Susan L. Hall

Susan L. Hall, Ed.D., is founder and president of an educational consulting and professional development company called 95 Percent Group, Inc. She is also a nationally certified trainer of DIBELS and LETRS. Susan is coauthor with Louisa Moats of two books, *Straight talk About Reading* and *Parenting a Struggling Reader*, and author of *I've DIBEL'd, Now What?* Her newest book, *Implementing Response to Intervention: A Principal's Guide* was published in December, 2007. Susan can be contacted at www.95percentgroup.com.

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RTI: Recycled Practices or a Unique Paradigm?

Susan L. Hall, Ed.D., 95 Percent Group, Inc.

Recently during a professional development workshop a veteran teacher raised her hand and expressed surprise that many of the components of RTI were not new ideas. It's true. Many of the practices that are included in RTI are not new. So is Response to Intervention special and unique?

First let's define RTI. Response to Intervention involves regular assessing proficiency in a skill, identifying students who are behind, providing intervention instruction in small groups for those students below benchmark, assessing periodically to monitor progress, and intensifying instruction for students whose progress is insufficient. Although the RTI paradigm can be used in math, other content areas, and even in relation to behavior, the focus of this article will be on reading. Some of the most important practices that are part of the RTI include:

- Data-differentiated instruction—use of assessment data to make instructional decisions about individual student needs

- Reaching of skills not mastered during whole-group core instruction in a small group setting
- Team meetings with teachers and reading specialists to discuss the progress of a student, often known as “a child study team process.”

Yet using data to make decisions about students, re-teaching in small groups, and meeting in teams to make decisions about students that are struggling are not new practices. So what's all the hoopla about RTI?

Is there anything about RTI that is unique?

1. The Assessment Data Used in the RTI Process is Different

Using data to make instructional decisions is not new. However the kind of data used in the past was different than what is now used in RTI, especially for teachers in grades K-3. Veteran kindergarten teachers report that they have for years screened students on numerous reading skills such as awareness of a word in print. Although the screeners gave teachers

some information, they lacked a key element. None of the information enabled a teacher to predict a student's later success in reading. Most of the time the assessments were untimed, and there were no clear benchmark levels to distinguish the at-risk students from those acquiring skills at an adequate pace. What was missing in the past was the insistence on evidence that the right precursor skills were being measured.

What's unique about RTI is that the selection of assessment instruments is grounded in research findings that emerged from the past 10-15 years of reading research. This substantial body of research not only clarifies which skills good readers use and poor readers lack, but it also demonstrates the effectiveness of early identification and intervention to prevent reading difficulties for many students. This focus on early intervention drove the development of early literacy screening instruments, most of which include curriculum-based measures (*continued on p. 2*)

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(CBM). Examples of widely known CBM assessments are DIBELS and AIMSweb. The specific skills that are measured are not randomly chosen, but rather are those that correlate best to predicting later reading success. Norms used as minimum benchmark scores are derived using very strict sampling procedures of random student selection and includes data from large pools of students. RTI emphasizes using CBM data because of the ability to repeatedly assess the same specific reading skills (most notably oral reading fluency), and progress monitor with alternate forms that are sensitive to small improvements in skills.

CBM data is not the only data needed to effectively implement RTI in a school. CBM's are used to universally screen all students periodically (typically 3 times a year). CBM data is used for universal screening, yet diagnostic data is just as critical in RTI. The universal screening is the first step to determine which students are at-risk, and to uncover the potential areas of deficiency. For below-benchmark students teachers then drill down with informal diagnostic assessments to pinpoint which skills the student has mastered, and which ones are still lacking. This pinpointing of deficit skills requires a different set of diagnostic instruments such as a phonological awareness screener, a phonics screener, and, potentially, a more detailed assessment of comprehension skills. Examples of diagnostic screeners include the Phonological Awareness Screener for Intervention™, and the Phonics

Screener for Intervention™ (both available at www.95percentgroup.com). Even though more schools have begun giving CBM's, teachers often have not been trained in procedures to adequately analyze and use the data to make decisions. Another problem has been an overreliance on CBM data without the use of companion diagnostic assessments to pinpoint deficit skills.

2. Intense Instruction in Deficient Skills Provided in Small Groups

A common practice in many classrooms is for the teacher to pull a few students to work with while the other students are occupied at independent work stations. Sometimes the teacher calls over a student who was absent so she can review missed lessons, and other times she may call over a couple of students she observed were not mastering a concept during whole-group instruction. Although the practice of re-teaching in small groups is not new, what is unique about RTI is that there is a more purposeful and intense type of instruction occurring in the small group. The teacher provides instruction that includes a lot of explicit modeling (I do, We do, You do), corrective feedback, and student practice. The instruction is planned to a far greater degree than the small group time described earlier in this paragraph.

3. Decisions are Made More Collaboratively

Teachers in the early elementary years are accustomed to working with their own homeroom students all day, and closing their classroom door to teach to the best of their ability. RTI requires more collaboration than this scenario both within a grade level and between teachers within a staff. The

grade-level teams determine whether they will share students across classes to enable tighter grouping, and how they will use teaching assistants and other staff to help teach some of the intervention groups. In addition to collaboration within grade-level teams, often special education teachers and other staff with expertise in assessment and reading instruction meet to review the data of all the students in intervention. They make decisions jointly about placement of students into particular instructional groups and the materials or programs that will be used for each group. Additionally, the team reviews the progress monitoring graphs to observe the rate of progress of each student, and decides when to intensify instruction or exit a student out of intervention.

Conclusion

In the past we knew assessing students for skill deficits in reading was important; we just didn't know which assessments were tied to predicting future success in reading. We knew it was necessary to re-teach skills not mastered; we just didn't know how to fine-tune and pinpoint exact skill needs using diagnostic assessments for phonics and phonological awareness. We knew it was important to get together and discuss students' needs, we just didn't know exactly what the most essential topics were for us to discuss. RTI provides a framework for a consolidated plan of action with a dedicated mission: at least 95% of students reading at grade level. And that merits the hoopla.

“...using data to make decisions about students, re-teaching in small groups, and meeting in teams to make decisions about students that are struggling are not new practices.”

Create Your Implementation Blueprint: Avoiding Implementation Pitfalls

By Susan L. Hall, Ed.D

This is a second article by Susan L. Hall outlining the pitfalls many schools experience when implementing a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach.

Implementing a Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach is a major undertaking. Even with careful planning and adequate buy-in, there are potential pitfalls than can hinder progress. Luckily, this is well-trod ground by now and the pitfalls, once you are aware of them, can be avoided.

PITFALL 1: UNDERESTIMATING THE MAGNITUDE OF CHANGE

It is easy for a school's leadership team to fail to see the full range of new practices that need to be installed and sustained for success. Reading articles and books about implementation can help, and visiting other schools that are in the full implementation stage of RTI will also help. But perhaps the most effective way to avoid thinking this is simple is to complete a self-assessment that includes a list of processes that need to be in place for full implementation.

PITFALL 2: TAKING ON TOO MANY GRADE LEVELS, TIERS, OR BUILDINGS IN THE FIRST YEAR

This is perhaps the most common mistake schools make. Some schools decide to implement RTI across the entire elementary building, or even K-8, all in the first year. A better approach is a phased one in which the implementation plan is limited to only some grade levels in the first year, is designed to expand to more grade levels in the second year, and so on. Taking on a limited number of grade levels gives staff time to be focused on learning it with a more limited

scope initially, and then the scope can be broadened to include other grades once there is more of an experience base on what's effective.

PITFALL 3: JUMPING IN WITHOUT A COMPREHENSIVE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Often a school that is enthusiastic about implementing RTI launches the initiative without enough thought about the entire process. Thorough planning is crucial for ensuring success. Reading articles such as those on this Web site is an important step in that direction.

PITFALL 4: FAILING TO VIEW THE IMPLEMENTATION AS A SYSTEMS-WIDE CHANGE

Although implementing RTI involves major changes to specific practices and techniques, it is also important to view RTI as systems-wide. The changes to the master schedule and a high degree of collaboration among and between grade levels means that the process affects the entire school, not just a couple of teachers. Administrators can avoid this pitfall by staying involved in decisions about how to organize a tiered service delivery model, staffing the intervention groups, and planning professional development on data analysis and grouping techniques.

PITFALL 5: FAILING TO DESIGNATE AN INTERVENTION BLOCK TIME IN THE MASTER SCHEDULE

Teachers already feel that their daily schedule is full, and finding time to provide intervention to small groups of students is difficult. However, the importance of this must be stressed. Providing the intervention instruction daily is critical to obtaining improvements.

PITFALL 6: FOCUSING TOO MANY RESOURCES ON ADMINISTERING AND COLLECTING AS-

SESSMENT DATA RATHER THAN ON HELPING STAFF LEARN TO USE THE DATA

Sometimes schools spend the majority of their budget on the assessment and reporting system; this leaves limited funding for professional development and coaching to teach the staff how to interpret the data. Collecting data with a curriculum-based measurement tool is an important initial task, but it is merely the first step. It almost seems as if some principals purchase the easiest way to get the data collected to keep teachers happy, even if it means spending 3-10 times more on one data reporting system versus another system that provides the same information in a different way. This pitfall can be avoided when administrators focus on data and analysis processes and the effectiveness of intervention instruction rather than on data collection and reporting.

PITFALL 7: VIEWING PURCHASED INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS AS SILVER BULLETS RATHER THAN AIDS TO HELP WELL-TRAINED TEACHERS MAKE INFORMED INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

Good programs save teachers time in lesson planning and assembling materials for instruction. Programs can't assure that instruction will be perfect. Some schools want a quick and easy solution and they are too easily convinced that a perfect program will lead to results. These schools misunderstand that intervention must be differentiated even more than with core programs. Too often when teachers follow scripted programs they aren't encouraged or taught how to differentiate instruction for in-

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Create Your Implementation Blueprint: Avoiding Implementation Pitfalls

(continued from page 3)

dividual students. Investing in professional development to improve the analytical and instructional decisions made by teachers will get schools better results.

PITFALL 8: FORMING GROUPS BASED ON A SURFACE VIEW OF THE DATA

Grouping by instructional recommendation level rather than pinpointing skill deficits is not effective. Schools using this approach are failing to look at error pattern analysis to see which students cannot complete the skill.

PITFALL 9: OVERRELYING ON CURRICULUM-BASED MEASUREMENT (CBM) DATA INSTEAD OF ORGANIZING AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM OF CBM DATA PLUS INFORMAL DIAGNOSTIC SCREENERS TO PINPOINT NEEDS

Thinking that a tool like the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) will provide everything needed for assessment is to overlook the importance of using informal diagnostic screeners in conjunction with it.

PITFALL 10: CONFUSING AWARENESS TRAINING WITH IMPLEMENTATION TRAINING

Schools sometimes fall into the trap of providing a great deal of awareness-type training and not following it with other types of training. These schools leave it to the teachers to try to figure this all out on their own without training and coaching. There is too often not enough professional development and coaching on how to use data, how to schedule intervention time, and how data analysis tech-

niques lead to tight focused groups.

PITFALL 11: USING INEFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO TRAINING TEACHERS THAT ARE MISMATCHED TO THE PRACTICES THAT HAVE TO BE CHANGED

The most effective models of professional development are job-embedded and are sustained with a focus on coaching. One-shot workshops will not work in helping teachers learn to implement the processes and practices of RTI. Teachers will need to learn to analyze data through a continual process of professional development and coaching. Appointing a peer coach who understands how to interpret data and model effective instruction is an important step in implementation.



Arkansas Reading Association

“Promoting Literacy in Arkansas for over 36 years!”

Reading...The Window To The World Tentative Conference Schedule

Thursday, November 20

7:30 a.m.—4:30 p.m.	Registration
8:00 a.m.—4:30 p.m.	Exhibits
8:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.	Breakout Sessions
10:00 a.m.—11:30 a.m.	First General Session, Camille Blachowicz
12:00 Noon—1:30 p.m.	Lunch Sessions
Session #1—Kimberly Willis Holt * Session #2—Ken Stamatis	
4:30 p.m.—6:00 p.m.	Authors' Coffee Break and Awards Presentation

Friday, November 21

7:30 a.m.—12:00 Noon	Registration
8:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m.	Exhibits
8:30 a.m.—10:00 p.m.	Second General Session, Linda Hoyt
10:30 a.m.—3:00 p.m.	Breakout Sessions
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.	Book & Author Luncheon, Sarah Weeks



Go to:
www.arareading.org
for more
conference information