

RTI²: Five Mistakes to Avoid

Implementing response to intervention at the secondary level is challenging, but building on solid instructional practices will help you avoid common mistakes.

By Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

Nancy Frey (nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, CA.

Douglas Fisher (dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College.

They are the authors of Enhancing RTI: How to ensure success with effective classroom instruction and intervention (2010, ASCD).



Watch the Video!

Watch teachers discuss how to support students through an RTI² model.

www.nassp.org/pl1211fisher

Implementing response to intervention (RTI) as a means for supporting students before they fall hopelessly behind often leaves secondary school educators scratching their heads. After all, much of the research on RTI is at the elementary level, and it often addresses such discrete skills as phonics and math facts. By comparison, much less is known about supporting secondary students whose difficulties are likely to be displayed in such disciplines as science and history in addition to reading and math.

Although RTI became broadly known because of its inclusion in IDEA 2004, it has existed as a theory and practice for decades. As described in federal legislation, the intent of RTI is twofold: to provide early intervention for students who are struggling and to allow for an alternate means of identifying the presence of a learning disability.

Unfortunately, in some places the latter purpose has overshadowed the former. In an effort to establish a balance between the two, a growing number of states are investing in a response to instruction and intervention (RTI²) model, which expands the RTI approach to focus on instruction first. This is good news for secondary schools, whose struggling students require a more nuanced approach. In this article, we will discuss five mistakes to avoid when establishing and implementing an RTI² program.

Mistake #1: Think Intervention, Not Instruction

An effective program begins with a high-quality core program—this is the first tier of the widely known three-tier model of RTI. (For more information, visit the RTI Action Network at www.rtinetwork.org.) As we have discussed in previous columns, a high-quality core

program includes scaffolded learning experiences expressed through a gradual release-of-responsibility instructional framework (Frey & Fisher, 2010).

This framework includes establishing the purpose of the lesson for students; modeling one's cognitive processes by thinking aloud; and providing guided instruction through the use of questions, prompts, and cues. In addition, students spend much of their time learning collaboratively with their peers in productive group work before attempting independent learning. Without those practices firmly in place in all classrooms, the supplemental and intensive intervention efforts of any school will be quickly overwhelmed by students who are failing simply because they are not receiving high-quality core instruction.

Consider the practices of earth science teacher Max Rittenhouse, who skillfully weaves these instructional practices throughout a lesson on the planets. He begins by telling students about the content purpose—"Today we'll be identifying the planets in the solar system"—and the language purpose—"You'll label a diagram of the planets and use it at your table to discuss the differences you're noticing between the inner and outer planets."

He models his thinking as he reads a short informational passage from the science textbook about the planet Mercury: "When I read the sentence saying that it can get to 700 kelvin on Mercury, I started thinking about the other planets. Are they all that hot? Maybe hot temperatures are going to be a characteristic of the other inner planets. I'm going to be looking for that when I read about the other planets."

As students label the diagram, he walks around the classroom and

pauses by Shannon, who has been struggling. The teacher checks for understanding by asking a question, then continues to scaffold the student's understanding.

Rittenhouse: So you've labeled the second planet from the Sun as Venus. What are some things you know about this planet?

Shannon: It's really hot there.

Rittenhouse: Does that remind you of another planet?

Shannon: Yeah, um, [looks at diagram] Mercury.

Rittenhouse: It's really close to the Sun. Is it hot everywhere on Venus?

Shannon: Yep, it's super hot, like 735 kelvin!

Rittenhouse: Is it cold at the north and south poles of Venus, like it is on Earth?

Shannon: [does not respond]

Rittenhouse: Take a look at the chart on page 76 to see if you can find the answer to that question.

Shannon: [after studying the chart for a few minutes] It says it's hot everywhere on Venus, even at the poles!

Soon the class has moved into productive work groups, and their task is to decide what attributes are shared among the inner planets of the solar system. Shannon's group initially stated that they were all made of rock but disagreed on whether each had a core, mantle, and crust. They consulted several Internet resources to find out whether they could claim this as a shared attribute and discovered that they could accurately make that claim as well. As the period came to a close, Rittenhouse assigned them homework for the evening: a review of the

previous unit on the geological and atmospheric attributes of the Earth. He knows that this background knowledge will help them to contextualize their studies on the attributes of the other planets in the coming days.

Mistake #2: Rely on Prepackaged Curricula

Although commercial programs that are labeled as being intervention-friendly can provide some needed practice materials, they cannot replace well-designed and individualized lessons that target the specific needs of secondary students. Shannon is fortunate to attend a high school that has avoided this error. "We used to drag all the tier two students through the same reading program, regardless of their needs," said reading specialist Elena Vargas. "Now I align my materials with what students are using in their content classrooms."

Shannon, who struggles with reading comprehension, reads passages from her science and history textbooks and other related texts. "I know from talking with Mr. Rittenhouse that Shannon's class is studying the planets right now, so the vocabulary and reading work that we're doing together right now is about the solar system," said Vargas. She counts on regular communication with the other teachers to design lessons that are meaningful.

Mistake #3: Isolate Teachers and Interventionists

Coordinating learning across the school day is challenging under the best of circumstances, and adding intervention efforts to the mix can be combustible. It can be tempting to simply put one teacher in charge of an intervention program, give him or her



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a classroom, and turn your attention to other matters. But isolating interventionists from classroom teachers severely limits the kind of collaboration that will benefit students. Instead, consider the team effort each student will need to be successful.

Ensure that every student receiving supplemental or intensive interventions has an identified person coordinating instruction and another coordinating intervention. Communication between those two educators can bridge the divide that can otherwise occur when interventions are disconnected from the core curriculum. In the video that accompanies this column, two teachers—one general education and the other special educa-

tion—talk about efforts to support students and note the importance of working together.

Mistake #4: Make Data Decisions Alone

Vargas collects data each time she meets with a student so that she can track the student's progress and determine what is working. Importantly, data collection and analysis also reveals when something is not working. "I initially started out using timed writing with Shannon, but I quickly discovered that it wasn't the best approach. I found that when I gave her a chance to discuss the reading with me for a few minutes first, her writing improved in length and content," said Vargas.

Both Rittenhouse and Vargas serve on the school's RTI² subcommittee, an outgrowth of the student study team that was formed to closely examine the circumstances surrounding specific students' behavioral or academic difficulties. The subcommittee meets monthly to discuss the progress of students receiving intervention supports. Vargas brings her data to the group for discussion and finds that others can sometimes spot a trend she had overlooked.

In addition, she can share her insights about what she has found effective. For instance, she recommended that Rittenhouse and Shannon's other teachers give Shannon a opportunity to compose orally in advance of extended writing assignments. "I've been more conscious of doing this for the last few weeks," the earth science teacher observed, "and I'm seeing that it's giving her a chance to organize her thoughts better. Her lab reports are beginning to improve."

Mistake # 5: Leave the Family Out of It

Family involvement is key when students are in the second and third tiers of RTI². In fact, they may possess quite a bit of information that can be helpful in determining ways to accelerate the students' learning. As keepers of their children's history, they have firsthand knowledge about what has worked in the past. But that information can come too late in the process if families are contacted only after a student's lack of progress warrants a referral for special education testing. It is understandable that families become frustrated when they learn that their child has been involved in an intervention for months without their knowledge.

At Shannon's school, her father and stepmother initially met with the administrator who oversees the RTI² program. The administrator explained why their daughter was being recommended for supplemental intervention and gathered information from them about past efforts. Later, Vargas spoke with them on the phone each month to share Shannon's progress and ask them about their observations.

Although Shannon's eventual progress did not result in a referral for special education testing, the school had gained two important allies. "I was caught a little off guard when the school called me," Shannon's father said later. "After all, she'd only been there for a few weeks." The girl's stepmother continued, "But we really got to see how much the school cares about Shannon's progress. It's good to know she's not just an anonymous student at a busy high school."

Conclusion

The logistical and curricular complexities of secondary schools can make RTI efforts difficult and can inadvertently result in a number of errors that can undermine the best of intentions. By paying attention to quality core instruction, keeping communication lines open among educators and families, and investing in meaningful curricular and data-driven decisions, however, schools can make a difference for students who struggle. It just takes focusing on the reciprocal relationship between instruction and intervention. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2010). Getting to quality: A meeting of the minds. *Principal Leadership*, 11(1), 68–70.

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