

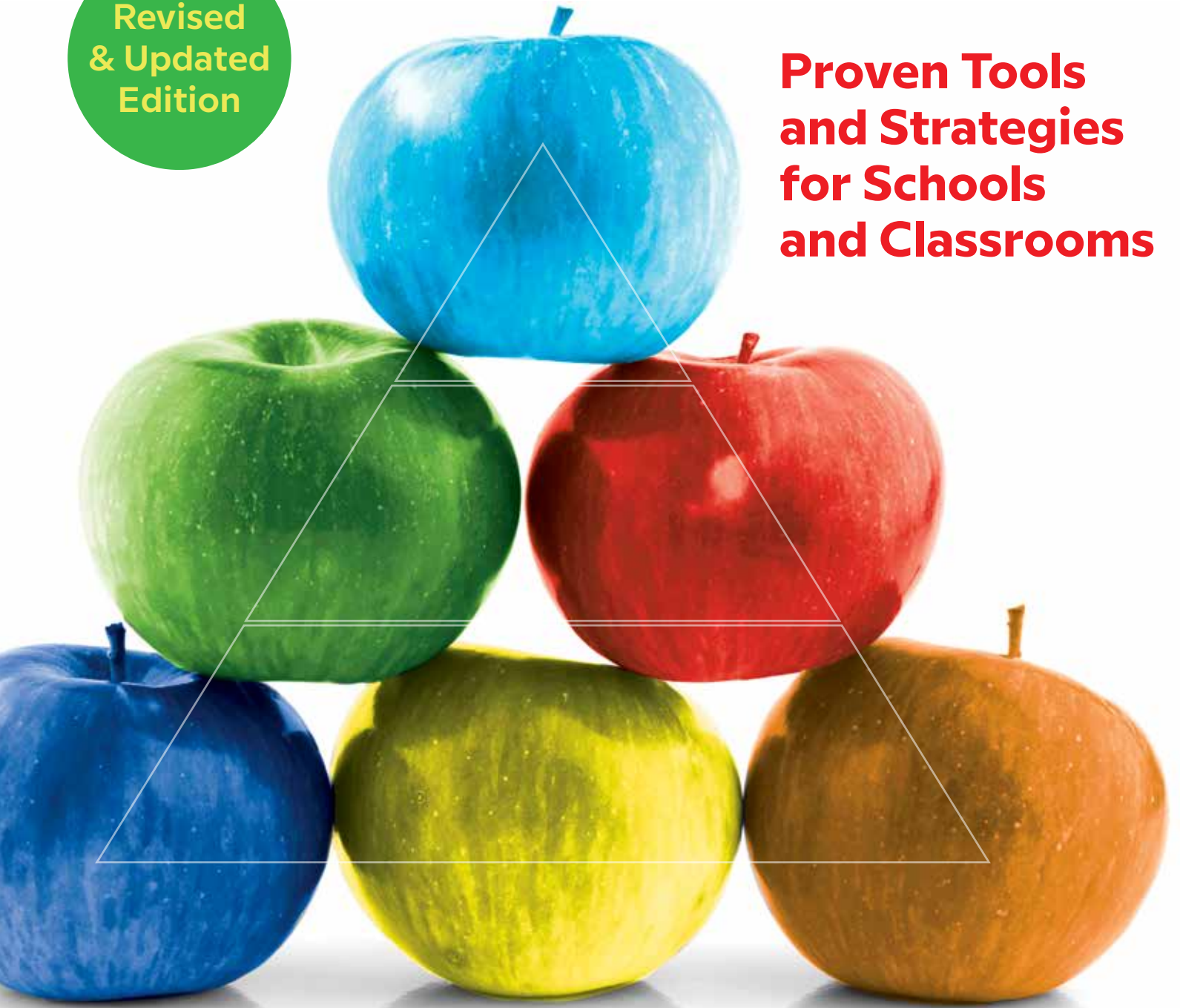
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# RTI SUCCESS

Revised  
& Updated  
Edition

**Proven Tools  
and Strategies  
for Schools  
and Classrooms**



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PUBLISHING®

**Elizabeth Whitten, Ph.D., Kelli J. Esteves, Ed.D.,  
and Alice Woodrow, Ed.D.**



## Praise for

# RTI SUCCESS

“*RTI Success* provides the essential tools teachers need that allow them to focus on positive student relationships, collaborate with other professionals and families, and design learner-centered instruction to meet each child’s unique needs. The chapter on co-teaching is invaluable, and the entire book is well organized with reproducible forms and ‘What to Try When’ charts to save teachers time!”

—**Karen Evans**, 4th-grade special education teacher, Judith Giacoma Elementary

“This is a must-have resource on your RTI shelf! Whether you’re looking for an introduction or a refresher, you’ll find what you need in this book. The authors have provided theory along with a practical approach for implementation of an RTI process. I appreciate the emphasis on essential elements of teaching and learning, such as strong student-teacher relationships and Universal Design for Learning within core curriculum. With guidance on assessment, progress monitoring, and considerations for each level of academic support, this book provides information, ready-to-use templates, and resources to help educators enhance learning and find success for all students.”

—**Heather Gorgas**, current administrator and former instructional coach, Avon Community School Corporation

“*RTI Success* is the most comprehensive resource I’ve found to enhance or begin a school’s RTI implementation. As a district leader of RTI for Indianapolis Public Schools, I have found this book to complement and improve our district’s current practices and teaching strategies. While the US Department of Education requires the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention, it does not mandate or endorse any particular model. This can make RTI subjective, complex, and confusing. Fortunately for educators, *RTI Success* brings welcome clarity. You can read the book cover to cover or pick it up and focus on the aspects of the RTI framework that your school needs to develop. The guidelines and reproducible documents in *RTI Success* can be easily implemented for any school’s unique needs, and the ‘RTI in Action’ sections provide real-life scaffolding examples to deepen understanding of the content. Our district has significantly increased our matrix of interventions due to the teaching strategies provided in this book, allowing us to implement specially designed instruction at any tier, all while sprucing up teachers’ personal tool kits. I’m grateful to have this all-encompassing book to reference time and time again.”

—**Kassi Hall**, special education specialist, multi-classroom leader, and district leader of RTI, Indianapolis Public Schools

“The authors of *RTI Success* have created a versatile guide that is beneficial to both veteran and new educators. This book is a powerful resource for continuous growth through the RTI process, utilizing easy-to-follow explanations, charts, tables, and templates to guide any educator. I am excited about using this book with my teams as we continue to move forward with RTI.”

—**Scott A. Deetz, Ph.D.**, superintendent, Madison-Grant United School Corporation

“All too often, the books we read as educational practitioners seeking to meet our students’ needs leave us wanting more. They fall short in the area of research or practice, and we find ourselves looking for guidance from the next book. The beauty of *RTI Success* is that it is founded, in all aspects, on comprehensive research and useful practical strategies that can be put into immediate practice in every school setting. Whether you are a seasoned educator or a novice, you’ll find step-by-step directions to help your students thrive as learners. Between the covers of *RTI Success*, school leaders will discover the knowledge they need to develop staff and create systems and structures within a school. The authors understand what students need to be fully supported as well as how to put structures in place that enable educators to provide that support. *RTI Success* is one of the few books that you will keep within reach on your desk and refer to over and over.”

—**Dr. Deborah Nuzzi**, director of secondary education, Battle Creek Public Schools

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for Schools and Classrooms**

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& Updated  
Edition**

**Elizabeth Whitten, Ph.D.  
Kelli J. Esteves, Ed.D.  
Alice Woodrow, Ed.D.**



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## **Dedication**

For Mike, Mackenzie, Mallory, and Matthew

—E.W.

For Dean, Ava, and Alex

—K.E.

For Rob, Parker, and Addison

—A.W.

## **Acknowledgments**

To our families, thank you for your encouragement to write the original version of *RTI Success* and for your continued support as we researched, revised, and updated this edition. To the teachers, counselors, principals, and many others in various roles who collaborated with us, thank you for helping us make improvements on this edition, and most importantly, for making a difference in the lives of your students. To our editor, Alison Behnke, thank you for understanding our vision and for helping us convey our ideas in the best possible way. To the team at Free Spirit Publishing, thank you for putting books out into the world that are aimed at helping children develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually.



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# Introduction

**“A teacher’s purpose is not to create students in his [or her] own image, but to develop students who can create their own image.”**

—Unknown

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a schoolwide approach to help educators address the needs of all learners. The multitiered structure is an intentional framework that provides for the delivery of high-quality, flexible, and differentiated instruction based on students’ academic readiness, needs, interests, and learning preferences. It draws on the proven efficacy of productive goal setting and ongoing progress monitoring within a multifaceted assessment system. Through the implementation of the many strategies, programs, and keys to effective teaching provided in this book, schools and educators can use RTI to harness their own skills, strengths, and resources to best meet the needs of every student.

Additionally, while the use of RTI *can* lead to a diagnosis of a student’s specific learning disability, it provides a school with a great deal more. When implemented well, it can be a powerful engine for improving the achievement and engagement of all students. *RTI Success* provides you with the practical information and tools you need to put RTI in place or refine an existing approach, to harness RTI’s benefits, and to successfully tackle its challenges.

**RTI can be a powerful engine for improving the achievement and engagement of all students.**

Educators who have embraced the practices of universal design for learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction will recognize that the core principles of UDL and differentiation are at the foundation of RTI. *Universal design for learning* is defined as “a framework for guiding educational practice that (a) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (b) reduces barriers in instruction; provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges; and maintains instructional accommodations.”\* UDL allows for accommodations in materials or procedures to help students learn. At the same time, UDL recognizes that these accommodations do not alter the standards that all students need to achieve. Rather, UDL’s accommodations allow students to learn *within* a standards framework, giving all learners an equal opportunity to meet the required goals. Differentiated instruction is similar in concept to UDL but is carried out in more fluid ways to respond to individual student needs.

UDL and differentiated instruction complement one another and many teachers have implemented both of these practices in their classrooms. RTI moves UDL and differentiated instruction to a schoolwide level by putting in place the structures needed for a team-based approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners.

\*Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, and Hall, 2005.

The RTI model began to gain prominence after the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognized it as an alternative means for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. However, RTI is much more than a diagnostic process. It is designed to improve the achievement of *all* students. The RTI framework emphasizes the importance of quality teaching, early intervention, and progress monitoring through effective instruction. The intention is to address students' unique learning needs in the general classroom whenever possible *before* academic problems requiring special education services can develop.

We have worked with many educators implementing RTI in schools, and we know that the model can raise questions and concerns at first. Teachers and administrators often are unsure how RTI will affect daily instruction yet they are also intrigued and encouraged by the model's many potential benefits. Educators are looking for assistance to help make it a reality in their schools.

*RTI Success* provides that assistance. The book presents comprehensive information on the RTI process, and then goes further, supplying hands-on, how-to tools teachers can use to help students succeed in the classroom. At the same time, it provides school leaders with step-by-step implementation guidelines and practical solutions to challenges that may arise in the course of building a strong RTI program and coordinating services throughout an entire school or district.

Whatever your role—general educator, special educator, literacy specialist, school counselor, or administrator—*RTI Success* is a one-stop resource for moving forward with the model in your environment.

## ▲ The RTI Model

---

Response to Intervention is a multitiered instruction model designed to promote growth for all learners. RTI first calls for the use of high-quality, evidence-based instructional techniques proven to foster learning and limit learning difficulties. These teaching methods are geared toward each student's individual learning preferences and interests. A systematic screening process is set up to identify students at risk for academic difficulty. Those students who struggle in the classroom then receive targeted academic interventions based on learning needs.

Within the RTI framework, teachers use frequent progress monitoring to gauge student achievement. If initial instructional efforts do not produce adequate academic growth, then more intensive interventions are introduced. Only after more vigorous intervention methods are shown to be unsuccessful (through comprehensive assessment) are students considered for special education services.

RTI encourages a great deal of collaboration and teamwork among teachers, administrators, special educators, and other staff. As members of RTI teams (discussed in chapter 2), staff members make decisions together about student instruction. Educators work together (along with parents) to assess students, monitor their progress, and implement interventions, which include differentiated grouping and instruction. Organizing and sharing information with one another is crucial as students receive instruction at each of the tiers.

In an era when many in education are continuously asked to do more with less, some educators express reservations about RTI, fearing it will add responsibilities to an

already full school day. It's important to recognize that RTI is not an add-on. In fact, it incorporates much of what educators already do. While RTI does present some new ways of doing things and a new lens for looking at instruction, these practices represent a step toward meeting an important objective: the success of all students.

## ▲ Why Use RTI?

---

The focus of RTI is on the use of high-quality personalized instruction, screening and progress monitoring for early intervention, schoolwide collaboration, and goal-oriented instruction within a multitiered service delivery model. This powerful approach has the potential to dramatically improve how we meet the needs of all students and transform how schools operate. Among RTI's many benefits are the following:

**Increased focus on early intervention.** RTI's emphasis on screening students at least three times each year can help identify early on those with learning challenges. Teachers can then implement interventions to remediate skill deficits before they lead to significant academic difficulties. Schools may use up to 15 percent of IDEA funds on these early intervention efforts for the whole school population.

**Targeted instruction based on student needs.** Teachers design instruction based on what they have learned about the academic readiness of each student. This attention on unique learner attributes keeps the classroom focus on delivering instruction that works for individual students (rather than a one-size-fits-all approach). UDL and differentiated instruction—staples of RTI—enable teachers to simultaneously address individual, small group, and large group needs.

**Instruction driven by assessment.** Within the RTI framework, student progress is monitored frequently and systematically to ensure learning is happening. If it is not, a different teaching strategy is put into place. This can help prevent time from being lost in addressing academic difficulties. Rather than try something over a long period of time without knowing whether it's working, teachers can verify a strategy's effectiveness with a particular learner. Thoughtful assessment practices can give insight into learner development and guide well-informed instructional decisions. This is at the heart of the RTI model.

**Improved quality of instruction.** RTI emphasizes the need for quality teaching through use of evidence-based instructional methods. When teaching methods are grounded in research, students have the best chance at success. Additionally, the model involves ongoing professional development. Training in the use of assessment tools and using proven curriculum, teaching strategies, and academic interventions help schools raise the bar when it comes to instruction.

**Focus on positive relationships in the classroom.** Within the RTI framework, teachers identify students' unique characteristics. This information can be helpful in creating a classroom where learners feel supported and confident in who they are. They are also more likely to be motivated when instruction accounts for their learning preferences and interest areas. At the same time, students learn to respect peers for their individual strengths and specialized knowledge.

RTI represents a step toward meeting an important objective: the success of all students.

**Increased schoolwide collaboration.** Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and other staff members work closely together within the RTI framework. School professionals participate on RTI teams, discussing student strengths and needs with one

Many schools and teachers already follow principles on which RTI is based—it's the purposeful commitment to a consistent and comprehensive schoolwide approach that gives it its strength.

another and determining appropriate academic interventions. Diverse areas of expertise among these educators can help groups identify effective strategies. At the same time, shared knowledge of a student's needs can ensure consistency in instruction. Collaborating together can also help staff members feel closer and more invested in one another's work. Many schools and teachers already follow principles on which RTI is based—it's the purposeful commitment to a consistent and comprehensive schoolwide approach that gives it its strength.

## ▲ What the Research Says\*

In 2001, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education issued a report suggesting that the discrepancy model (see page 11) be replaced as a basis for determining eligibility in the area of learning disabilities. The Commission recommended a system of early intervention and assessment directly tied to instruction. At the National Summit on Learning Disabilities that same year, RTI was called the "most promising" method for identifying learning disabilities. These developments were reflected in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA recognizing RTI as an option for the identification process. Ongoing studies by the National Institute for Child Health and Development confirm that the discrepancy model delays appropriate education services to students. The organization endorses the early intervention services integral to RTI.\*\*

Response to Intervention is much more than a replacement of the discrepancy model, and the research on RTI is complex given the many elements of RTI's implementation and use. Research does exist focusing on individual elements of RTI such as universal screening, various evidence-based instructional strategies and programs, monitoring student progress, and differentiated instruction within a multitiered system of support. Comprehensive field study research is still emerging, and more longitudinal research needs to be done to assist educators with implementation and application. Still, we can draw some conclusions from the field study research that does exist:\*\*\*

- ▲ Evidence shows that a multitiered approach to early intervention can improve academic achievement for students who are at risk. (However, most studies on early intervention have focused on reading skills.)
- ▲ RTI is more sustainable when its implementation involves professional development, administration support, buy-in from all school personnel, and time for collaboration.
- ▲ Some studies show that RTI may lead to a decrease in referral and placement rates for special education, although others show largely consistent rates.

\* Batsche et al. (2005); Fuchs and Fuchs (2006); Bender and Shores (2007); and Hughes and Dexter ([rtinetwork.org/learn/research/researchreview](http://rtinetwork.org/learn/research/researchreview)).

\*\* Many of the studies supporting the efficacy of RTI have been conducted by US government agencies looking to establish best practices for identifying and addressing learning disabilities.

\*\*\* "Field Studies of RTI Programs, Revised" by Charles Hughes and Douglas D. Dexter, [rtinetwork.org/learn/research/field-studies-rti-programs](http://rtinetwork.org/learn/research/field-studies-rti-programs).



The RTI Action Network website ([rtinetwork.org](http://rtinetwork.org)) is one place where you can monitor research related to RTI. For more information on this site, see page 12.

## ▲ About This Book and Digital Content

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*RTI Success* has been written with the needs of the entire school staff in mind. Some sections may be more useful to one reader or another. In this new edition of *RTI Success* we have included expanded information in each chapter as well as a new chapter on how to co-teach effectively within the context of RTI.

**Part I: Implementation.** Here are tools for developing a successful RTI program.

- ▲ **Chapter 1: Response to Intervention** offers comprehensive information helpful for all staff toward understanding RTI as a schoolwide model. The section explains the core beliefs behind RTI and provides a full analysis of the multitiered service delivery model.
- ▲ **Chapter 2: Setting Up RTI Teams and the Problem-Solving Process** details how staff can work together to support the RTI initiative and includes information for administrators who are putting together RTI teams in a school- or district-wide effort. Descriptions of RTI meeting structures and the problem-solving process illuminate staff roles in making decisions about instruction.

**Part II: Assessment.** A crucial aspect of RTI is ongoing learner assessment. This part of the book provides tools for developing a comprehensive evaluation program.

- ▲ **Chapter 3: Creating and Sustaining Positive Learning Environments** provides tools for carrying out personalized learner assessments to understand students as individuals and learners. Gathering this information helps base instructional decisions on how students best learn. Tools in this section also help promote strong relationships in the classroom. It also provides tools for promoting a strong and supportive classroom culture that values learner diversity.
- ▲ **Chapter 4: Academic Assessment** provides information on achievement indicators important within the RTI framework. Tools for screening and progress monitoring are covered in depth, as are guidelines for making determinations about movement between tiers. RTI team members can use the “Educational Profile” at the end of the chapter to make and record decisions about instruction.

**Part III: Instruction.** The final section of the book offers practical strategies for the classroom.

- ▲ **Chapter 5: Purposeful Grouping** provides differentiation strategies teachers can use to meet student needs based on personalized learner assessments as well as academic assessments. The chapter includes information for creating and managing groups that challenge and meet the learning needs of all students within diverse classrooms.
- ▲ **Chapter 6: Co-Teaching** explores how educators can work together to help students reach learning goals. Descriptions of co-teaching models are explained. Quality indicators for evaluating your approaches are provided, along with evidence-based strategies for effective co-teaching practices.

- ▲ **Chapter 7: Evidence-Based Teaching** features a wide range of proven instructional methods to use with learners. “What to Try When” charts will help educators align learning goals with instructional strategies. Over 100 evidence-based strategies are offered to meet a variety of needs.

Within each of these chapters, you’ll find a variety of helpful elements. The figures located throughout the book provide at-a-glance information about RTI. In addition, “Spotlight” boxes provide key information about the framework and demonstrate how to carry out important RTI processes. The “RTI in Action” elements offer instructive examples of how the model is being carried out in schools. Throughout the book you will also find reproducible forms that can be used in planning, implementing, and carrying out RTI. The forms can be copied from the book, downloaded and printed, or filled out electronically in their digital format. For information on downloading the forms, see page 250.

At the end of the book you will find an extensive list of references and resources for further exploration.

## ▲ Overcoming Challenges

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Because RTI continues to evolve at the same time schools are implementing it, certain challenges are inevitable. This book has been written with the challenges in mind and is designed to help address them.

One challenge is that most research on the effectiveness of RTI has been conducted on individual elements of RTI rather than on comprehensive programs. Field studies on comprehensive implementation are complicated by the fact that school structures are unique, and various schools’ implementation of RTI differ significantly. This makes it difficult to generalize based on field studies. Additionally, confusion remains about the framework’s role in the determination of specific learning disabilities (SLD). While some states do provide guidance on best practices, it is often up to individual districts to develop procedures on their own.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

This book features examples from across grade levels and subject areas to give you an idea of how the model can take shape in diverse environments. Additionally, you’ll find a discussion of the model’s role in special education referrals (pages 97–98) in chapter 4. The web links included throughout the book can also connect you with updates on best practices as RTI procedures continue to evolve.

Another potential difficulty that can arise in schools implementing RTI is confusion about the model within the school community. Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and support staff must work together in new ways to support a school’s RTI initiative. Significant changes in staff relationships and roles may be necessary and can create the potential for misunderstanding (or even resentment).

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

Carefully crafted professional development can help increase confidence in your RTI initiative and ensure consistency in the delivery of services. This book and digital content provide comprehensive information on RTI and a PDF presentation that can

be used for staff development. Ready-to-use reproducible forms can also help streamline RTI processes.

Misperceptions about the scope of RTI within the school community can also present challenges. Classroom teachers may think of RTI as a “special education thing.” Even those who understand RTI as a model designed to meet the needs of all students might perceive its potential benefits to be limited to students with learning disabilities, when in reality, it has great potential to meet the needs of all learners, including those with high levels of academic readiness. While the model strives to meet the needs of all students at their current levels, that message may sometimes be difficult to get across.

Carefully crafted professional development can help increase confidence with implementation of RTI and ensure consistency in the delivery of services.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

Students benefit when teachers learn more about them as unique learners. With this information, teachers can plan lessons that engage and challenge all learners. It’s important to highlight this information with parents or advocates who may have reservations about RTI. (You might share the PDF presentation from the digital content in a parent–teacher organization meeting.) You’ll also find tools for the practical work of identifying students’ unique attributes, capitalizing on their areas of strength, and differentiating instruction according to learning preferences and other factors.

Rapid, full-scale implementation of Response to Intervention has the potential to be costly. Depending upon a school or district’s readiness for RTI, there may be a need for in-depth staff development and extensive curriculum resources. Considerable funding and time requirements may appear to be a barrier to implementation for schools looking to adopt the model.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

The practical tools in this book are offered toward reducing potential costs related to training, progress monitoring, and resource requirements. Also, the resources that appear throughout provide web links where additional tools (often cost-free) can be found. One other thing to keep in mind: RTI can save districts money (and in effect “pay for itself”) due to the emphasis on early intervention.

This last potential concern highlights a very important point: RTI can be implemented in stages. Schools may start, for example, by either piloting the program in limited locations or at specific grade levels across the district. Training and resource decisions can thus be made on a limited scale. This is true during initial implementation or if your school district needs to reevaluate and make changes to the way it has implemented RTI.

## ▲ A Word of Advice

While this book presents a structure to follow and a wealth of tools to support your RTI initiative, it is not a rigid blueprint. All the recommendations are offered with the caveat that specific situations at your school or in your classroom may call for doing things in

a different way. The goal of RTI is not to complete some “official” version of the model. Rather, the very nature of the framework calls for meeting the unique needs of each student. Just as there is no single way to teach, there is no uniform way to administer RTI. Each school or district can make decisions about implementing or refining RTI based on an evaluation of structures that are already in place and which align with RTI principles.

When implemented well, RTI can better unify general education and special education services. This convergence of resources can have significant benefits as the importance of labeling students is diminished and greater focus is placed on effective early intervention.

We wish you all the best on your RTI journey. We are interested to learn about your progress and any strategies that have proven especially helpful in your setting. Please share your thoughts with us throughout your journey. You may contact us in care of our publisher:

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# PART I

**“There is a brilliant child  
locked inside every student.”**

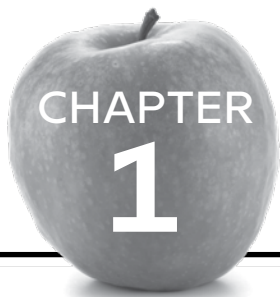
—Marva Collins, educator and author of  
*Ordinary Children, Extraordinary Teachers*

# Implementation

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a schoolwide framework designed to raise student achievement. As a result, implementing the model involves coordinating multiple processes among staff members. Some of the procedures supporting RTI are most likely already in place in your school or district. In these cases, only slight adaptations to existing processes may be needed. Other procedures may be new to your environment and require larger-scale change to school schedules and staff responsibilities.

The two chapters in Part I are intended to help with your school’s transition to RTI or help with an evaluation of your existing model. Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the model that can be useful in familiarizing staff members with RTI. The section offers an explanation of the core beliefs of RTI and analysis of its three instructional tiers. Chapter 2 gives step-by-step recommendations that administrators and other school leaders can use in school- or district-wide implementation or evaluation. The section also details the problem-solving process that RTI teams will use to make decisions about instruction.

While Part I is written with the expectation that RTI is a new instructional framework for you and your school, the information can also be helpful in environments where programs are already up and running. In these settings, the book may help as you seek to improve existing group processes and provide additional staff development.



# Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a type of Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) that provides an evidence-based framework for meeting the challenges of today's classroom. But even though many educators have embraced RTI as a proactive approach for addressing targeted learner needs, questions remain about the details and logistics. What are the instructional tiers? Who is ultimately responsible for delivering instruction and interventions at each tier? What does RTI look like in practice at the schoolwide level?

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of the RTI model. Whether you are a teacher wondering about the implications RTI will have on your classroom role or an administrator involved in implementation, this section can provide you with information helpful in carrying out the model in your setting.

## ▲ Understanding RTI

RTI is an assessment, instruction, and intervention process designed to help schools meet students' diverse learning needs. The model emphasizes the importance of high-quality, evidence-based core instruction in every classroom. The intent is to foster student achievement and limit learning difficulties through the use of evidence-based methods. The RTI framework also takes into account students' specific learning strengths, interests, and preferences.

An important component of RTI is comprehensive learner assessment. Screening measures are used to gauge academic achievement, diagnostic evaluations are conducted to identify specific strengths and needs, and early interventions are put in place to help students who are not achieving benchmarks. Progress is monitored closely, and more intensive academic interventions are introduced for learners who continue to struggle. Only after comprehensive assessment has shown that more vigorous intervention methods are unsuccessful may students be referred for special education services.

RTI has many advantages over earlier models used to address students' different levels of academic readiness. First, it reduces the likelihood that ineffective instruction or inappropriate curriculum are the reasons for students' struggles, because the RTI model requires that both instruction and curriculum are carefully designed to meet targeted and individualized learning goals. Additionally, early intervention efforts can help resolve learning problems before they severely distance a student from peers. Another benefit: Progress

monitoring and diagnostic assessment enable educators to target gaps in learning by using the ways in which individual students learn best. In short, RTI is an instructional model designed to be both *proactive* and *responsive* to student needs.

While RTI emerged from special education legislation, the model's focus on early, classroom-based interventions makes it primarily a general education initiative. RTI is designed to ensure vigorous, evidence-based education and meaningful, intentional

**The RTI model requires that both instruction and curriculum are carefully designed to meet targeted and individualized learning goals.**

progress monitoring for *all* students—not just those at risk of learning difficulties. Additionally, many interventions for those learners who are struggling academically (especially early on) are administered in the general education classroom. In this way, RTI represents a marriage of general and special education services. It provides a problem-solving process for making decisions about instruction (detailed in chapter 2) that can be valuable in working with any student.

## SPOTLIGHT

### The Evolution of Special Education and RTI

Since passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), schools have been required by law to address the unique needs of students with disabilities. While this legal imperative has been a constant for more than forty years, how schools have fulfilled these responsibilities has changed over time. Initially, students with disabilities were largely separated from peers in pull-out settings. A strong inclusion movement in the mid-1980s led many educators to condemn this practice, and schools began to (as much as possible) accommodate students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

In addition to debate over best practices for educating students with special needs, questions remain about how to identify learning disabilities. Students were identified for services under the learning disabilities category when a severe discrepancy was shown between ability and academic achievement. The most commonly used method for identifying a discrepancy was to compare IQ testing results with scores on achievement tests.

For years educators have criticized the discrepancy model as a “wait to fail” approach for addressing learning disabilities. In the model,

students were not identified as learning disabled (and thus eligible for special education services) until they demonstrated a significant discrepancy between their abilities and achievement. Years of struggle might have passed before learners received the intensive instruction or remediation that they needed in problem areas. Other flaws have been cited: For example, the identification process did not account for cultural, linguistic, or other individual attributes that might influence testing results. It also did not consider the quality of instruction students received.

Policy makers sought to design a more responsive way to address students’ needs—a proactive model that could prevent chronic failure in the classroom. The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 presented language setting up RTI as an alternative to the discrepancy model for identifying students with learning disabilities. The emphasis on preventative frameworks and evidence-based instructional strategies included within No Child Left Behind in 2002 (later reauthorized to the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015) also became a signature component of RTI. Data collection and progress monitoring, represented in Reading First programs, were also included within RTI provisions.

Within the RTI model, general and special educators work together closely to address learner needs in the general education classroom. This collaborative approach to instruction is not new but based on another movement: the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Introduced in the 1980s, REI also featured educators of diverse teaching backgrounds collaborating in the general education classroom. Although the initiative had the support of special education teachers, it was unsuccessful because it lacked the support of general educators, a fact that underscores the importance of schoolwide engagement. (Chapter 2 features ideas for building support for the model.) Implemented well, RTI represents a distinct change in the way teachers teach and schools think.

# SPOTLIGHT

## Useful RTI Resources

### **RTI Action Network**

[www.rtinetwork.org](http://www.rtinetwork.org)

The RTI Action Network guides educators in effective RTI implementation so that every child has access to high-quality instruction and struggling students are identified early and receive the help and support they need to succeed. The RTI Action Network is a program of the National Center for Learning Disabilities ([www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org)).

### **IDEA—US Department of Education**

[idea.ed.gov](http://idea.ed.gov)

Visit this site for information on how RTI can be used for SLD (specific learning disabilities) determination and procedures required by US law. You'll also find up-to-date information on specific regulations for implementing RTI in your state and

details on how up to 15 percent of IDEA funding can be used for early intervention services (EIS).

### **Center on Response to Intervention**

[www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)

A common criticism of RTI has been that inadequate information is available on best practices and standardized guidelines for movement between the tiers. The Center on Response to Intervention serves as a clearinghouse for practices that are being shown effective in schools throughout the country. For example, it provides best practices for middle school implementation, a subject previously under-explored in research on RTI. Visit the website for comprehensive information, practical tools, and opportunities to collaborate and network with others interested in these issues.

## ▲ Three Tiers of Instruction

RTI incorporates a multitiered approach to instruction. While the specific designation of these levels can vary, most school districts implementing RTI to this point have favored a three-tiered model. Tier I is the universal level of instruction provided to all students within the classroom; assessments are routinely administered to screen for learning difficulties. Tier II interventions represent more targeted teaching methods directed toward students at risk of academic difficulty. For those students not responding to Tier II instruction, Tier III interventions may be required. These are the most intensive interventions designed to support students with the most significant academic needs. Frequent progress monitoring and diagnostic evaluation determine any changes in intervention and instruction over time.

### **Tier I**

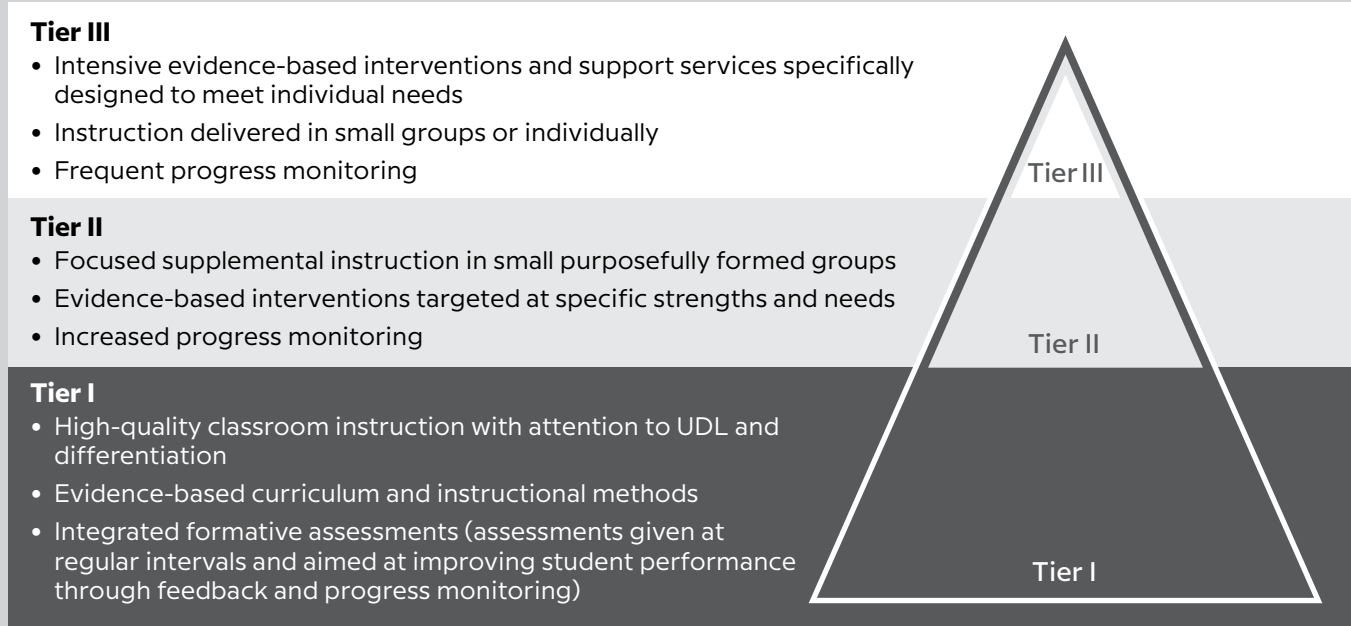
Tier I (universal level) instruction emphasizes use of high-quality, evidence-based core curricula and teaching methods that have been shown to promote learning and limit learning difficulties. Tier I instruction includes:

**Evidence-based instruction.** Teachers use a wide range of instructional methods that have been shown to work in the classroom. These teaching strategies are often geared to a specific population of students to meet unique needs. Chapter 7 features strategies teachers can use with diverse learners.

**Assessment of student learning strengths, interests, and academic performance.** RTI acknowledges the individuality of every student. Teachers collect comprehensive data



**Figure 1.1 RTI's Instructional Tiers**



on learners so that a full portfolio of strengths, deficits, and interests can be compiled. Chapter 3 includes ready-to-use assessments that are helpful in this process.

**Teaching strategies targeted toward individual academic needs, interests, and learning strengths.** Techniques for raising achievement are not “one size fits all.” Instead, instructional methods are selected based upon students’ individual learning needs, strengths, and interests. Chapter 7 features interventions that can be used to target specific student needs.

**Differentiated instruction within the classroom.** Teachers instruct diverse learners within the general education classroom by providing teaching based on individual student need.

**Purposeful and flexible grouping.** The need to provide differentiated instruction makes purposeful and flexible grouping an essential classroom practice. Groups are based on academic skills, learning characteristics, and interests (rather than only on ability levels). Chapter 5 features suggestions for grouping learners.

## ▶ RTI in Action

### Mr. Aiden at Tier I

Mr. Aiden is a second-grade teacher at Malley Elementary School. He and his colleagues at the school share literacy curricular materials and use support strategies that have been compiled and sanctioned by the school as examples of evidence-based methods. As part of this reading instruction, Mr. Aiden regularly gauges student progress using curriculum-based measurements.

These assessments measure factors such as word recognition and reading fluency. In the fall, Mr. Aiden screens his class to establish a baseline and determine if any of his students may be at risk for reading failure. This screening process is carried out by all Malley Elementary classroom teachers. Then the baseline data is reviewed by the RTI team to establish tiered intervention groups.

**Collaboration.** Teachers work as a team to analyze data and make decisions about interventions. Additionally, some teachers may adjust their traditional instructional roles to implement effective co-teaching strategies. Chapter 2 offers more information about teaming and chapter 6 explains co-teaching methods.

**Screening of student achievement.** As part of Tier I instruction, students are screened in content areas a minimum of three times each year to gauge progress. Many schools elect to gauge student performance in fall, winter, and spring. Chapter 4 provides comprehensive information on screening learners.

**Ongoing professional development.** Evidence-based education programs and methods on their own cannot ensure achievement. It's important that schools fully train classroom teachers and support staff in delivering Tier I curricula and instructional strategies. Staff members should have continuing opportunities to expand their knowledge in innovative, evidence-based teaching and assessment methods. Chapter 2 features extensive information on staff development.

**Figure 1.2 Components of Tier I Instruction**

<b>Target Audience</b>	All students
<b>Instructional Focus</b>	Evidence-based programs, strategies, and instructional methods
<b>Grouping</b>	Purposeful and flexible grouping formats within the general education classroom
<b>Instructional Time</b>	90 minutes per day or more for literacy, 60 minutes per day or more for math
<b>Assessment</b>	Universal screening at beginning, middle, and end of academic year, assessment of students' learning strengths and interests, summative assessment after units of instruction
<b>Interventionists</b>	General education classroom teachers
<b>Setting</b>	General education classroom

## Tier II

At Tier II, increased intervention helps students who need more support, enabling them to reach their goals and meet academic benchmarks. This tier is characterized by small-group instruction targeting students' specific areas of need. Progress is monitored throughout the intervention period.

Tier II (targeted level) instruction is designed to address learning challenges that emerge during screening and diagnostic assessment. Students who are identified as at risk (by scoring below benchmarks or struggling to grasp key concepts, for example) receive additional instruction, often for thirty-minute intervals in small-group settings.

The Tier II interventionist can be the general classroom teacher, a specialist, or a special education teacher. The person implementing the intervention should have a level of expertise matched with the intervention itself. That is, if the interventionist is teaching reading comprehension skills, he or she should be highly qualified to teach reading. While paraeducators play a valuable role at Tier II, RTI teams will want to be cautious

about using these personnel to deliver lessons or programs as a means of Tier II or III intervention. Students who have academic needs have the right to a skilled teacher who understands the nuances of academic development. Students receive this instruction in addition to the general education curriculum. Tier II interventions include:

**Diagnostic assessment of students’ academic strengths and needs.** Learning strengths, deficits, preferences, and interests of students are identified. Fully understanding learners is important toward tailoring interventions to unique learner attributes.

**Collaborative problem-solving by RTI teams.** RTI teams meet to review and discuss the learning attributes of students who are struggling. These team members work together to identify instructional approaches that are likely to work with learners. RTI teams and the problem-solving process these teams use to make decisions about instruction are detailed in chapter 2.

**Supplemental evidence-based interventions that target the identified areas of need.** When a learner’s specific needs have been determined, an intervention can be chosen. These strategies for raising achievement should account not only for student difficulties, but also learning interests and strengths.

**Small-group instruction.** At Tier II, interventions are often administered to small groups of learners within the classroom. Special educators, specialists, and other support staff trained in implementing interventions may assist classroom teachers.

**Monitoring of interventions.** Staff members collaborate to ensure interventions are implemented in the way they have been designed. Peer observation is the most common method for monitoring strategies. It’s important that at least one educator is fully trained in using the selected Tier II strategy.

**Figure 1.3 Components of Tier II Instruction**

<b>Target Audience</b>	Students who have been identified as needing additional differentiation and support to reach learning goals
<b>Instructional Focus</b>	Evidence-based interventions consisting of programs and/or strategies designed and employed to supplement, enhance, and support core instruction
<b>Purposeful and Flexible Grouping</b>	Small-group instruction based on academic readiness and/or similar learning goals
<b>Instructional Time</b>	Minimum of 30 minutes per day, three to four times per week in small group, in addition to Tier I instruction
<b>Assessment</b>	Progress monitoring weekly or biweekly on target skills to ensure adequate progress and learning
<b>Interventionists</b>	Personnel determined by the school (general education teacher, literacy specialist, intervention specialist, Title 1 teacher, speech and language pathologist, and so on)
<b>Setting</b>	General education or pull-out classroom

## RTI in Action

### Mr. Aiden at Tier II

Screening tests conducted by Mr. Aiden in the fall reveal that several of his second-grade students struggle to identify basic words that their peers recognize. Further analysis reveals that these students are on track to score below grade-level standards established by the state. In accordance with RTI guidelines at Malley Elementary, Mr. Aiden refers these students to his grade-level team. Upon reviewing scores and learning profiles, the team decides these students can benefit from additional instruction in a small-group setting. An intervention is designed in which the school's literacy specialist works with these students for an additional thirty minutes (three times a week) for six weeks, or until grade-level proficiency is reached. Progress is monitored biweekly through curriculum-based measurements.

## RTI in Action

### Mr. Aiden at Tier III

After six weeks of additional instruction time at Tier II, only one student from Mr. Aiden's original group has not progressed to grade-level proficiency. The grade-level RTI team reviews the data from the preceding weeks and decides that this student would benefit from more intensive intervention at Tier III. They establish a plan for the student to be taught literacy skills under the close oversight of a literacy specialist for thirty minutes three times each week. The intervention plan calls for a special education referral in the event that this weekly progress monitoring does not reveal grade-level achievement by the end of the school year.

**Progress monitoring.** Progress monitoring is a vital element of RTI and should be conducted at least twice a month as part of Tier II interventions. This performance data is the basis for future decisions on student instruction. Chapter 4 provides comprehensive information on monitoring learner progress.

### Tier III

Students at Tier III receive an increased level of support compared to Tier II. Tier III's increased intensity can be accomplished in two ways that may overlap. One way is to increase the amount of time spent working on the targeted goals. The other primary way to increase intensity is to decrease the student-to-interventionist ratio. The team will also need to consider whether a change in the type of intervention is needed. For example, if a student has not progressed after focused Tier II attention on increasing reading fluency, educators will consider changing the type of intervention. As in Tier II, progress will be closely monitored throughout the intervention. Typically, the Tier III interventionist is a special education teacher or another specialist, not the general education teacher. Tier III instruction should involve:

**More intensive interventions.** Tier III interventions are more vigorous attempts to raise student achievement. They build on what's been learned from instructional strategies employed during Tier II.

**Increased one-on-one or small-group instruction.** When Tier II interventions fail to raise student achievement, it becomes important to provide more individualized attention through increased group or individual work. A combination of both may also be necessary.

**Evidence-based strategies targeted to learner attributes.** As in Tier II, interventions are based on a student's academic needs, interests, and learning strengths and preferences. Learner inventories and progress monitoring data can provide additional insight to guide instruction.

**Monitoring of interventions.** Staff members again collaborate to ensure interventions are implemented correctly. It's important that at least one educator is fully trained in using the selected Tier III strategy.

**Progress monitoring.** More frequent progress monitoring is called for as the intensity of interventions increases. At Tier III, student progress should be monitored at least once a week.

**Figure 1.4 Components of Tier III Instruction**

<b>Target Audience</b>	Students who have been identified with marked difficulties who have not fully responded to Tier II efforts
<b>Instructional Focus</b>	Evidence-based interventions that consist of programs and/or strategies designed and employed to supplement, enhance, and support Tier I and Tier II
<b>Purposeful and Flexible Grouping</b>	Small-group instruction or individual instruction
<b>Instructional Time</b>	Minimum of 30 minutes per day, three to four times per week individually or in small groups, in addition to Tier I instruction
<b>Assessment</b>	Weekly progress monitoring on target skills to ensure adequate progress and learning
<b>Interventionists</b>	Personnel determined by the school (special education teacher, literacy specialist, intervention specialist, Title 1 teacher, speech and language pathologist, and so on)
<b>Setting</b>	Appropriate setting designated by the school

## ▲ Five Principles of RTI\*

- 1. All children can learn.** RTI is a model designed on the principle that every student can learn and achieve his or her full potential. It recognizes that helping students succeed is about *how* they are taught and *what* they are taught. In an RTI model, all students are assured quality teaching, thus eliminating weak instruction as potential cause for failure. Students' individual learning strengths and deficits are accounted for in the classroom by teachers able to differentiate instruction for diverse needs. Learners in need of extra support receive it at varying levels of intensity in a multi-tiered service delivery model. This framework of evidence-based, differentiated instruction and early intervention has the potential to minimize the severity of learning problems and prevent negative impacts on a student's self-esteem that can result from sustained school failure.
- 2. Quality assessment informs instructional practices.** It's important that decisions about student instruction are driven by data. While progress monitoring is essential to the RTI process, it is not the only type of assessment needed. Personalized learner assessments allow for understanding students' learning strengths and interests. Diagnostic evaluation targets specific academic strengths and needs. Summative assessment reveals whether or not the instruction was effective. And universal screening identifies students who might be at risk. A multifaceted approach to assessing learners is most effective in determining appropriate instruction.
- 3. Quality teaching makes a difference.** A critical element of RTI is the proper use of evidence-based teaching methods. The focus is on proactively creating an

When students feel safe and accepted by teachers, they demonstrate greater academic growth. Respecting students' learning strengths and interests promotes learning and fosters an environment where students can thrive.

\* These principles encompass important aspects of RTI identified by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) in *Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation* (2006).

instructional environment that sets up students for high levels of achievement. Core curriculum, interventions, and instructional methods should all be grounded in research and have a high probability for success. Evidence-based teaching goes beyond validated programs and strategies to include proven instructional methods such as differentiated instruction. This is an important principle of RTI because all learners must have the opportunity to learn (and demonstrate their learning) in ways that allow them to be successful. Instruction should be designed to account for students' learning strengths, interests, and academic readiness.

4. **Positive relationships within the classroom maximize learning.** Studies show the importance of positive and supportive student-teacher relationships. When students feel safe and accepted by teachers, they demonstrate greater academic growth. Respecting students' learning strengths and interests promotes learning and fosters an environment where students can thrive. Flexible grouping and peer-assisted learning, both essential components of RTI, allow teachers to simultaneously build students' social and academic skills; as relationships are strengthened, so too are students' academic skills.
5. **Educators must work as a team.** RTI is a general education initiative. Responsibility for carrying out the model, however, should not fall solely on the shoulders of

**Figure 1.5 Core Beliefs and Key Elements of RTI**

Core Belief	Action	Key Element of RTI
All children can learn.	Promote early intervention to prevent significant problems by addressing them when they are minor. Help students achieve their personal best by differentiating instruction through a multitiered service delivery model. Monitor academic growth through progress monitoring and intervene when sufficient progress is not made.	Early intervention  Differentiated instruction in a multitiered service delivery model  Progress monitoring
Quality assessment informs instructional practices.	Collect meaningful data and use that data to drive instruction. Assign data teams to analyze results.	Academic assessment  Personalized learner assessment
Quality teaching makes a difference.	Use evidence-based teaching strategies and programs with fidelity of implementation. Design instruction so that all students have access to the material presented. Assess students' learning strengths, interests, and academic readiness.	Evidence-based teaching  Differentiated instruction  Personalized learner assessment
Positive relationships within the classroom maximize learning.	Get to know students on a personal level. Facilitate positive relationships among peers.	Personalized learner assessment Flexible grouping and peer-assisted learning
Educators must work as a team.	Use a team approach to problem-solving. Participate in collaborative team teaching.	Transdisciplinary teaming

classroom teachers. Rather, educators of all backgrounds and experiences participate in various forms of teamwork to meet the needs of students. For example, it is through a group problem-solving process that academic interventions are determined. Educators also engage in teaming to differentiate instruction for diverse learner needs. Successful teaching within the RTI framework is not an isolated act. Instead, educators support one another in efforts to ensure academic success for all students. Parents are also involved in the teaming process, because they can provide insight into children's learning strengths, interests, and academic needs.

## RTI in Action

### **RTI: One School's Story**

Leonard Elementary began its Response to Intervention journey when the first-year principal realized the child study team was unable to keep up with the number of academic referrals for special education testing. Additionally, the number of students identified as eligible for special education services was increasing at a rate in which the existing staff could not provide adequate service.

In order to determine students' needs on a group basis (rather than by individual students), the principal moved the child study team process to grade-level teams. Each group of grade-level teachers began meeting on a monthly basis with the purpose of analyzing student data and creating instructional groups. These groupings were based on student performance on formative assessments in reading and math. As the teachers observed the performance of students in their classrooms, they began to identify learners whose data showed that they needed more intense instruction than what was provided by the existing curriculum.

The principal supported teachers by purchasing intervention materials for reading and math. As

teachers identified students in need of additional instruction, more intensive interventions were provided using strategies from these sources. These interventions occurred in addition to time regularly allotted for reading and math instruction. Running records were kept on students and weekly progress monitoring was conducted with curriculum-based measurements.

At monthly grade-level meetings, teachers looked at the progress monitoring data to determine whether students showed sufficient progress or if changes to interventions were needed. Only when data indicated inadequate progress after numerous interventions did these groups refer students for a comprehensive evaluation for special education.

Success of the RTI process at Leonard Elementary hinged on the ability of school leaders and teachers to work together. Collaboratively, staff members were able to analyze student data, group students for appropriate interventions, and document progress monitoring data toward making future instructional decisions.