

Make It Work

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Kimberly D. Clements, Ph.D.,
NBCT, and Russell A. Sabella,
Ph.D.

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by: Kimberly D. Clements, Ph.D., NBCT, and Russell A. Sabella, Ph.D.

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Some school counselors are wondering if RTI stands for "real-time interruption." They cry out questions such as, "Here I am trying to implement a comprehensive school counseling program, how do I now attend to yet another initiative?" "Isn't this just another educational fad? How long will this one last?" "Isn't RTI another way to screen and refer students to special education?" "Isn't this a non-counseling duty?" "How will I ever work with kids when I have to sit behind a computer looking at data all day?"

The reality, and the good news, is that the response to intervention (RTI) process is not another initiative that will add on to the already high expectations of school counselors and all educators. RTI is not a special education pre-referral system or duty that will require all-day data crunching. And, although education has certainly witnessed some fads that have come and gone, we don't believe RTI is going away anytime soon. In fact, once you get to know the RTI process, you will realize that it is highly consistent with all the components of comprehensive school counseling programs as espoused by the ASCA National Model.

In fact, if you have been conducting closing-the-achievement-gap activities as part of your school counseling program, you are already engaged in the RTI process. You can even recognize various ASCA National Model components (e.g., data-driven decision making; continuum of interventions; student achievement, collaboration/teaming, monitoring progress and advocacy) throughout the RTI literature and within the definition of RTI.

According to the National Center on Response to Intervention, RTI integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.

Another popular RTI definition is that of the RTI Action Network: Response to intervention is a multi-tiered approach to help struggling learners. Students' progress is closely monitored at each stage of intervention to determine the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education or both.

Consider the following real examples of a school counselor engaging in the RTI process as part of the RTI team at her school.

The Case of Jerry

Jerry is a five-year-old kindergarten student who lives with both parents. This is his first experience being in school as he has neither attended preschool nor voluntary pre-kindergarten. His preschool assessment, which was conducted by one of the kindergarten teachers, indicated he was entering school with developmentally appropriate skills for a five year old. After approximately one month, Jerry was referred to the school counselor for what his teacher identified as "oppositional behaviors."

The school counselor planned to meet with Jerry on a weekly basis, but, after a couple of weeks, it became apparent Jerry wasn't happy about being removed from his classroom to spend time with anyone at school. To best meet his needs, Jerry's teacher and school counselor decided the counseling sessions would take place either in his classroom or at a table that was located right outside the classroom door. Still, other than sitting down and looking around, Jerry was largely unresponsive to the counseling intervention. His behavior continued to be a problem for him in class, a disruption to the other students and a distraction for the teacher or other adults who entered the room.

An RTI team meeting, which consisted of Jerry's parents, the school counselor and the teacher, was scheduled to discuss the situation and identify other strategies that might help Jerry get on track with his classroom behavior. With parent permission, the school counselor initiated the RTI process and data collection, which included a review of his registration information, health records, attendance history and several communications/meetings with his parents.

After approximately two weeks of observations and documentation of his academics and behavior in a variety of settings, the school-based RTI team met to write an initial behavior plan for him. Jerry's most significant goal was identified as "compliance with adult requests," which was broad enough to include such specific behaviors as remaining in his seat, following directions and keeping his hands to himself. His parents agreed they also wanted to see these behaviors at home and in public. Because Jerry was classified as Tier II in the RTI process, he would receive interventions in the classroom to include small-group work with other students who were exhibiting similar problems. Jerry was also placed on a rewards system whereby he could earn a certain number of points each day as an incentive that was especially positive for him.

His parents were supportive of the plan and agreed to adopt it at home as well, which allowed Jerry to earn points and rewards both at school and home for exhibiting the target behaviors. When the RTI team members re-convened five weeks later and reviewed Jerry's performance data, they determined his behavior had improved slightly and that he was exhibiting more cooperation in the classroom and at home. To adjust for satiation, they changed the reward system so Jerry would need to earn a higher number of points for each reward. Additionally, the team members, including his parents, agreed the RTI plan would continue as developed, without the need to move him into Tier III interventions, which would also include psychological testing for the presence of an emotional behavior disorder.

After another five weeks, the RTI team met once again to review Jerry's progress and concluded his behavior was continually improving. The team members decided he should remain at Tier II, and they would continually monitor his process. At this point, his teacher reports that Jerry is positively responsive to others. He comes willingly to counseling sessions and he is helpful in the classroom and at home. Additionally, he has made significant progress with staying in his seat, following directions and keeping his hands to himself. Although he has greatly improved, the RTI team decided to keep Jerry at Tier II interventions and review his placement at the beginning of first grade to see if he is still experiencing success and can be moved to Tier I, indicating he no longer needs the RTI process.

The Case of Sara

Sara is a 10-year-old third-grade student who has previously been retained due to her low scores on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. This is her second time at this grade level, and although her reading comprehension and vocabulary development have greatly improved, she is now struggling with math concepts.

Sara was referred to the school counselor approximately three months into third grade after her teacher began to notice increasing problems with Sara's math work. She seemed unable to identify the correct method for solving problems and was puzzled when asked to explain how she arrived at a specific answer. While reviewing her cumulative record, Sara's teacher noticed her math scores had dropped only slightly last year and that she did not seem to have trouble with applying math concepts to solving a problem.

When Sara's RTI team convened, which included her teacher, the school counselor, the reading teacher, the behavior specialist and her mother, Sara's mother said Sara sometimes complained about not understanding her math homework but that she seemed able to complete it without too much trouble. Her scores on the district math assessments, however, indicated Sara was indeed having difficulty in mathematics applications.

The team reviewed Sara's records including her test scores, observations during math class and her academic history. It was unclear at first whether the goal should be increasing Sara's understanding of math concepts or if she was missing more "basic" skills, such as addition and subtraction. The team decided to obtain more information about her current math performance and then re-convene to specify the goal more precisely. One week later, the team met again and decided Sara was in need of increased work in addition and subtraction concepts as she seemed to have some difficulty with these operations.

The team placed Sara at Tier II with an RTI plan that included small-group interventions with the teacher allowing her to practice her addition and subtraction concepts on a weekly basis. Sara's assessment would focus on using a math computer program that also would help her to identify and apply the basic math skills. In addition, Sara's mother worked with her at home using flash cards, and

Sara was enrolled in after-school tutoring to further strengthen her use of math concepts.

After five weeks, the RTI team reviewed her progress and determined Sara had not only increased the number of addition and subtraction rules she had learned but also improved her memorization of

them. She could also describe how she arrived at the answers to flash cards when assessed in class and at home. As a next step, the RTI team decided to check her multiplication and division skills and found them to be well below that of her peers. The team decided to target these skills as well, while continuing to work with her on addition and subtraction concepts. As of this writing, the RTI team is monitoring Sara's progress to determine whether or not she needs Tier III interventions, which would allow her to work individually with the teacher and participate in more frequent assessments.

RTI and School Counseling

Essentially, RTI represents a theoretical approach to identifying students who are struggling in reading, mathematics or behavior through action research, during which appropriate interventions are provided and continually assessed to determine whether or not they are working and what should be done to best support the student and have the greatest impact.

In terms of practicality, RTI involves the participation of various school personnel including administrators, teachers, school counselors, specialists, as well as parents, who comprise the RTI team. The RTI team identifies each struggling student's needs, develops a plan to address those needs, determines the appropriate tier (or level of intervention) necessary and meets to review data and plan the next course of action for the student.

RTI's central purpose is to resolve academic or behavioral challenges through preventive measures so the student experiences success and is able to achieve developmental and grade-level goals. RTI is an effective, efficient, data-driven and highly collaborative process that takes advantage of the collective expertise and experiences of the parents, RTI team and the student.

In essence, RTI can actually help school counselors garner support and promote buy-in from other stakeholders for further developing, managing, enhancing and being accountable for their comprehensive school counseling programs.

Kimberly D. Clements, Ph.D., NBCT, is a school counselor at Colonial Elementary School in Fort Myers, Fla., and a National Board Certified Teacher, School Counseling. She may be reached at kimdc@leeschools.net. Russell A. Sabella, Ph.D., is professor of counseling at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, Fla. He may be reached at rsabella@fgcu.edu.

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