

# Response to Intervention (RTI)

Research Brief July 2021

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A relatively new practice in education, Response to Intervention (RTI) is a means to evaluate students' educational and behavioral needs, identify students needing supports beyond core instruction, and determine students' eligibility for special education services<sup>[1-2]</sup>. It operates in a tiered framework as a system of supports that aims to promote early identification, monitor student progress, and provide supplemental supports and services necessary for all students to succeed in school<sup>[3]</sup>. Originally, RTI was developed for early literacy programs in elementary grades<sup>[4-5]</sup>, but has now been incorporated into math, reading, and behavior across all school levels<sup>[6-7]</sup>.

Interest and research in RTI have increased over the two decades following the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004<sup>[3-4]</sup>. This federal statute responded to criticism of the previous model for identifying students with special needs and provided an alternative to the discredited IQ achievement discrepancy formula<sup>[3,8]</sup>. Before RTI, students in need of special education services were identified by comparing achievement in class to their IQ scores; if their performance in class was substantially lower than their IQ score, they qualified for special education services<sup>[9]</sup>. However, this model failed to identify students with learning disabilities early in their education, leaving students in need of services without them, potentially for years<sup>[9]</sup>. IDEA 2004 emphasizes RTI as a means to provide high-quality instruction, promote early intervention of students with learning difficulties, and prevent the misdiagnosis of children with learning disabilities<sup>[10]</sup>. Key components of RTI, as outlined in the reauthorization, include a current scientific, research-based core curriculum, universal screening and progress monitoring of all students, and intervention supports of increasing intensity, as necessary<sup>[3]</sup>. Despite these guidelines offered in IDEA 2004, there are no procedural standards for implementation, so uncertainty in the guidance surrounding specific RTI implementation has led to multiple, occasionally conflicting, approaches across schools<sup>[6]</sup>. Despite a lack of centralized guidance surrounding RTI implementation, many districts have found success utilizing this framework; this brief will highlight best-practices that have been identified through educational research as key contributors to success.

## A TIERED APPROACH

RTI encompasses three tiers. All students begin in Tier 1; in the general education classroom, students receive quality instruction consistent with research-based best practices. To ensure that students are not struggling due to inappropriate or inadequate

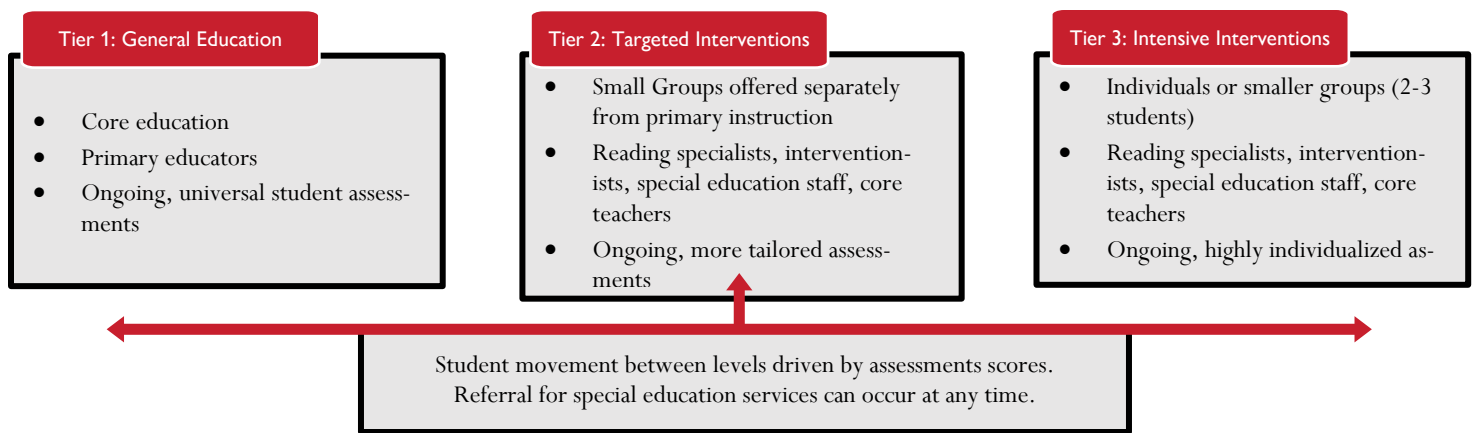
instruction<sup>[10]</sup>. In Tier 1, general education teachers routinely screen their students to measure their rate of learning and academic achievements<sup>[2]</sup>. Students that perform below expectations or do not demonstrate adequate progress consistent with their peers in Tier 1 are then referred to additional supports in Tier 2<sup>[2]</sup>, where they receive elevated levels of instruction, typically administered in the form of smaller group learning. Those that are still unable to find success at this level are moved to Tier 3, an even more intensive and individualized intervention where students undergo a comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services<sup>[2]</sup>. The RTI system includes three distinct, but heavily interrelated, levels of education services where students move between tiers as their progress is continuously assessed<sup>[2-3]</sup>.

**Tier 1 Instruction.** Tier 1 is the cornerstone of an effective RTI program and includes what is commonly considered general or “mainstream” education. At this level, instructors and administration seek to provide high-quality scientifically based instruction to all students<sup>[2]</sup>. This is important, as ensuring that all students are receiving the same level of education dismisses the possibility of any potential learning difficulties being connected to inadequate or poor educational practices<sup>[2,11]</sup>. From here, it is then up to the general education teachers to actively screen their students and assess for learning disabilities<sup>[2,11]</sup>. These screenings are typically broad, universal assessments such as state or district-level testing that can indicate early-on if a student is struggling with a subject area<sup>[2]</sup>. Depending on the individual RTI program, these “at-risk” students will then either receive supplemental instruction in their regular classroom, or they will be referred for Tier 2 instruction<sup>[2,11]</sup>.

**Tier 2 Instruction.** Tier 2 education includes more targeted, specialized interventions for students that require support beyond Tier 1. This level of instruction includes smaller group learning in separate classrooms, or in some cases has been offered as extra-help in the form of either tutoring or even peer-mentorship<sup>[2,11-12]</sup>. These small group interventions are provided 3 to 5 days a week by trained reading specialists, interventionists (potentially including special education teachers), or offered by the core classroom teacher outside of regular instruction<sup>[13]</sup>. Students are further assessed at this level and will either show improvement and move back to Tier 1 or will demonstrate a need for more intensive services and will be further assessed for inclusion in Tier 3<sup>[2,11]</sup>.

**Tier 3 Instruction.** Tier 3 is distinguished from Tier 2 in terms of its intensity of instruction, and the qualifications of the staff members who provide it. Interventions at this level are provided to either individual students or 2 to 3 students at a time. Educational

RTI...  
Identifies students in need  
Provides additional supports  
Determines eligibility for additional services



practices at this level directly target individual student deficits following comprehensive testing, and at this stage usually include referrals for special education services as outlined in the IDEA reauthorization of 2004<sup>[2,11]</sup>. Like Tier 2, services at Tier 3 are provided by trained reading specialists, interventionists, or by the core classroom teacher outside of regular instruction<sup>[13]</sup>. Since this tier utilizes the school system’s existing special education teams heavily, the structuring of this level often appears quite different between various school districts based on resources available<sup>[2,11]</sup>.

## BEST-PRACTICES FOR RTI IMPLEMENTATION

By standardizing the process in which students are referred for increasingly intensive services and incorporating research-based screening tools and assessments, RTI programs provide an overall increase in student achievement<sup>[5,11,14]</sup>. This process also aids in the prevention of false positive referrals for costly special education services without detriment to student learning outcomes<sup>[5,11,14]</sup>. It is important to note that RTI programs will differ depending on grade level, largely due to difficulties present in secondary schools that can make RTI implementation more challenging<sup>[12]</sup>. In higher grades, the increase in complexity of the schools themselves such as having multiple class periods throughout the day, multiple semesters throughout the year, and the advanced administrative structure itself pose challenges that do not affect lower grades<sup>[2,12]</sup>. Despite these added difficulties, the RTI structure is flexible enough to be applied at any educational level. Below are common qualities of successful RTI programs, with special considerations added for secondary school implementation.

**Quality, Standardized Core Instruction.** Placing a focus on core instruction (Tier 1) and ensuring that each student is receiving a quality general education is of the utmost importance<sup>[2,12]</sup>. In one case example, a high school did this by ensuring that all content areas were being taught with the same, empirically based methods which included modeling, guided instruction, group work, and independent learning tasks<sup>[12]</sup>. Schools were able to ensure this uniformity in instruction through sustained professional learning, observations, and instructional modelling. These educators found that standardizing instructional methods across departments was helpful<sup>[12]</sup>.

**Collaboration and Faculty Support.** Research has shown that successful RTI initiatives have involved school-wide collaboration. This means involving all relevant staff in the planning and

implementation of the process, including content area teachers, special education staff, and administrators from all grades. Additionally, extensive professional development and training must be made available to all these individuals at all stages in the process<sup>[12,15]</sup>. Some educators in the beginning stages of RTI implementation have reported feeling fatigued by the steep learning curve for assessments and data collection, which is why it is so important to support faculty and staff during this process<sup>[15]</sup>. In one case example, faculty at a high school met every other week for 90 minutes over the course of the first year of RTI implementation that included topics such as quality core instruction, supplemental intervention education, and help with administering standardized assessments<sup>[12]</sup>.

**Readily Available Screening Tools.** Educators and staff should be well-versed in the various curriculum-based assessment tools available at each grade level and for their relevant content area<sup>[12]</sup>. Ongoing assessment and progress monitoring of students within each Tier forms the basis for the research-supported interventions that are delivered to students<sup>[11-12]</sup>. It is important to ensure that all educators and faculty feel comfortable using these assessment tools, and that the tools themselves are always available<sup>[12]</sup>. Although much variation exists in the screening tools and assessments used, educators are encouraged to consult with existing child study teams and special education staff to determine the best way to cater to their student populations.

**RTI Leadership Team.** Many successful RTI initiatives develop and train an RTI Team or RTI Leadership Team early in the process<sup>[15]</sup>. This group of educators typically includes administrators and special education staff and is responsible for oversight of the RTI program rollout, professional development offerings, and coordinating student Tier referrals from teachers<sup>[15]</sup>. Creation of an RTI team is helpful at any grade level, but especially so at the secondary level due to the issues surrounding class scheduling and organizational complexity<sup>[2,11]</sup>.

## ADMINISTRATIVE CODE CONSIDERATIONS

The New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC) is the state’s compilation of administrative rules and guidance for both governmental and educational agencies. Relevant sections to consider when implementing an RTI program include those specifying the treatment of individuals with potential learning disabilities<sup>[13]</sup>. While the RTI framework is designed to identify students at-risk and route them

to appropriate services in a timely manner, all students are still eligible at any time for direct referral for special education services. Under Title 6, chapter 14 of the NJAC, “a direct referral to the child study team may be made... when it can be documented that the nature of the student’s educational problem(s) is such that evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services under this chapter is without delay”<sup>[2,16]</sup>. As such, it is important to remember that at any Tier, a student may still be referred by parents or staff for special education evaluation<sup>[13]</sup>. Similar considerations for RTI have also been included in NJAC 16 and QSAC.

## HOW TO FUND YOUR RTI PROGRAM

If your school already receives federal funding from Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IV, or IDEA Part B, you will likely be able to apply some of the funding to assist in the planning and implementation of your RTI initiative. See below for a brief overview for funding allocation:

Source	Applicable Funds
Title I Part A	Funds may be used for most activities related to implementing RTI such as hiring intervention teachers, purchasing supplementary materials, purchasing a data management system, and providing professional development on intervention strategies)
Title II Part A	Funds can be used for professional development related to RTI including trainings on delivering interventions, referring at-risk students, and how to make data-based decisions
Title III Part A	Funds can be used to support English Language Learners and/or Immigrant students
Title IV Part A	Funds can be used for most activities related to implementing RTI. Can be used alone or with Title I, Part A; Title II, Part A; or IDEA, Part B Funds.
IDEA Part B	Funds may only be applied to <u>excess costs</u> involved with providing a free and appropriate education to students with disabilities. This might include supplementary materials, supplementary assessments, hiring additional staff members, promoting parent and family engagement, interventions to include students with disabilities, and activities to reduce paperwork (such as purchasing a data management system for IEPs)
IDEA Part B, CEIS*	Up to 15% of IDEA, Part B funds can be used to assist students that are not currently enrolled in special education or related services but who need extra support (academic or behavioral).
Retrieved from NJDOE, Unlocking your Federal Funds <sup>[17]</sup> *Coordinated Early Intervening Services	

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# Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices

The Center for Effective School Practices (CESP) is a practice-focused unit of the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University dedicated to excellence and equity in education research and practice. CESP’s work is designed to facilitate and support collaborations among public and private school districts in the tri-state area, institutions of higher education, local, state, and federal government agencies, community organizations, and industry partners to produce practitioner-relevant best-practices in education. The Center is supported by a robust team of experienced researchers and evaluators with a passion for augmenting the capacity of educators and policy makers to develop and deliver high-quality evidence-based instruction, curriculum, programs, and policy initiatives, with an intentional focus on those that effectively reach students from historically disadvantaged populations.