

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Special Education Services

Research Brief **September 2021**

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Response to Intervention (RTI) is a three-tiered model used to evaluate students' learning needs, identify those that require academic and behavioral supports beyond core instruction, and determine eligibility for special education services [1-2]. Originally developed for early literacy programs in elementary schools, RTI is now also used to evaluate students' reading, math, and behavioral needs across all grade levels [3-4]. Within an effective RTI model, schools utilize evidence-based programs aligned with state learning standards and all educators receive ongoing professional development [5]. Universal screening measures along with ongoing assessments are used to establish academic and behavioral baselines as well as progress-tracking data. This process equips educators with the information needed to accurately identify learners that could benefit from additional support and coordinate differentiated instruction based on students' specific learning needs [2, 6-7].

RTI implementation typically involves the creation of an RTI leadership team at the school, which includes a broad array of educators including administration, special education staff, and general education teachers [7-9]. This team of specialists is responsible for making decisions involving student placement at each tier based on their analysis of the collected assessment data and recommendations from teachers [10, 11-12]. Within the RTI framework, all students begin in Tier 1, which is where the core curriculum and basic instruction are delivered [2, 10-13]. Tier 2 involves more targeted interventions (typically in the form of smaller group learning) for students that are not finding success within Tier 1 and require an elevated level of support to reach proficiency [2, 10]. Students that require further support are then moved to Tier 3. This third tier includes the most intensive, highly individualized interventions which are applied by trained professionals including special education teachers and content area specialists [7, 8]. Students that require even more than Tier 3 alone can provide are then referred for special education testing and subsequent placement where appropriate, but still continue to receive Tier 3 supports [10, 12-14].

IDEA AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) forms the foundation for special education law in the United States. Prior to IDEA, an estimated four million children with disabilities were either excluded from attending school or placed in separate classrooms unfit to meet their academic and behavioral needs [15, 16]. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, over seven million students with disabilities received special education services under IDEA, with the majority attending general education classes in their local public

schools [17, 18]. IDEA entitles all children with mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral disabilities to a free and appropriate education that meets their specific learning needs and prepares them to continue their education, gain meaningful employment, and live independently [15-16]. IDEA acknowledges that every child, no matter how severe their disability, can benefit from education [20]. Schools are required to provide early interventions for students exhibiting learning difficulties, provide testing accommodations and equal access to the core curriculum, and educate students in the least restrictive environment possible when appropriate [16, 19, 20].

Under IDEA, states are responsible for establishing and enforcing standards and regulations requiring schools to have written procedures for locating, evaluating, and providing special education services to students with disabilities [15]. Special education law not only requires schools to provide interventions that address students' skill deficits, but also requires educators to document the type, frequency, duration, and success of each intervention [8, 15, 21]. When a student is unable to demonstrate sufficient progress after a specified period of time despite appropriate, evidence-based instruction, they may undergo an evaluation to determine their eligibility for special education services [8, 15]. Important to note is that parents, general education teachers, school district staff members, or external agencies are all able to initiate a special education evaluation referral at any time [17].

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RTI

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA presented RTI as an alternative to the previously discredited IQ discrepancy formula. This system required students to demonstrate achievement levels far below their ability level (measured by IQ score) before being provided critically needed special education services – essentially requiring students to fail before providing support [7, 22-25]. Made optional by IDEA 2004, the IQ discrepancy formula has been heavily criticized for leading to the overidentification of students with disabilities and inappropriate placements of students in special education who could have found success with just a moderate amount of additional

RTI works *with* existing special education systems to deliver high-quality, individualized, evidence-based instruction

support [21, 26]. Incorrect placement in special education classes has been shown to negatively impact students' wellbeing by limiting exposure to Tier 1 instruction as well as opportunities to interact with their peers in the

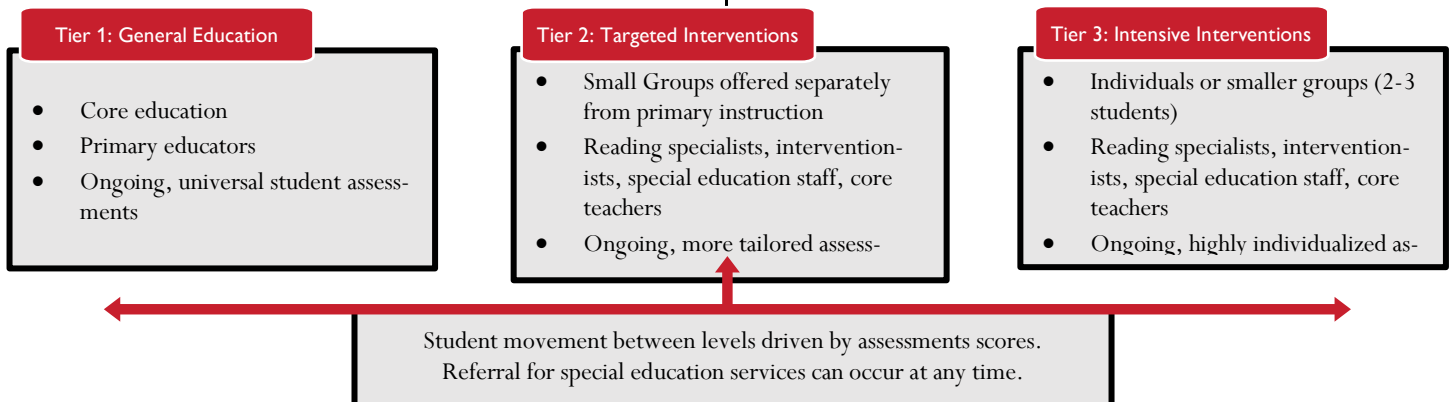
general education classroom ^[26-27]. Students inappropriately placed in special education undergo unnecessary and costly initial evaluations and subsequent reevaluations, misusing the already limited time and resources of special education department ^[20, 26]. Thus, unnecessary referrals for evaluations and placements in special education impedes students' rights to an appropriate education and places a strain on schools' limited budgets.

Due to its proactive, multi-tiered approach and emphasis on high quality, evidence-based instruction for addressing student learning needs, RTI is promoted as a means to both increase the accuracy of eligibility determinations and reduce inappropriate special education placements ^[7, 21, 28-29]. When provided with supplemental instruction early, some students are able to overcome learning difficulties thus eliminating the need for a special education evaluation and resulting in considerable cost savings ^[8, 26, 30]. As an example, one school district in Arizona implemented an RTI model in five of its elementary schools and observed a significant reduction in the number of students inaccurately referred for special education evaluations as well as an increase in the percentage of eligible students qualifying for services ^[15]. One year after RTI implementation, learning disability diagnoses in this district decreased from 6 percent to 3.5 percent and special education placement costs decreased over 50 percent from \$152,138.08 in 2002-2003 to \$75,556.00 in 2003-2004 ^[15].

There is a misconception in the existing literature that Tier 3 is synonymous with special education services ^[7, 12, 31]. While true that Tier 3 instruction does encompass special education services when appropriate, students placed in Tier 3 without a referral for a special education evaluation still receive highly individualized, intensive interventions albeit without the full resources of the special education department or a formal IEP ^[32]. Similarly, students with disabilities that have qualified for special education services can also continue to participate in Tier 3 interventions ^[7, 12]. Thus, Tier 3 and special education services can be best conceptualized as interconnected entities that share many of the same resources but offer distinct services ^[7]. An example of this interplay exists within the process for determining special education eligibility. IDEA 2004 encourages schools to use multiple data points to make special education referrals and placements, which may include data generated through RTI assessments and progress-monitoring. However, RTI data can only be used to supplement, not supplant, a comprehensive evaluation by special education professionals to determine eligibility for services ^[33].

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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.