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## *Queries and Opportunities*

Knowledge comes from taking things apart, but wisdom comes from putting things together.

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Response to Intervention is mandated in some states and districts, and optional or nonexistent in others. Adequate numbers of teachers and specialists are not available to address the multiple needs of students in certain schools and districts. RtI calls for individual instruction and teacher judgment based on evidence-based decisions, and therefore results across various school types and student populations can vary based on differences in teacher factors.

There are models of success, but evidence-based research is minimal. Adoption rates are growing, yet no one has figured out how to identify and evaluate interventions in a comprehensive, sustained manner across classrooms and schools. Screening, monitoring, and diagnostic tools have to be better defined. Some of the floating questions about RtI are listed below:

1. What are the best measures for predicting learning problems?
2. How can exit standards, high-stakes benchmarks, graduation standards, and learning standards be aligned with RtI procedures?
3. How can teachers manage the RtI process during the instructional day, especially if they are responsible for large numbers of underperforming students?
4. What are the proven models and interventions that are most successful in inner cities and rural environments?

Even though there are questions and dilemmas, it only makes sense that the first requirement is to ensure that a student's learning is initially linked

to adequate school and classroom instruction. There are many preconditions and mediating factors that need to be considered. Undertaking educational renewal is a tedious commitment requiring steadfastness, tolerance, knowledge, and skill. To facilitate a defensible end point, the following precautions and recommendations are offered for consideration.

1. *Ensure that a systemic, coherent curriculum model is in place.* Deciding what knowledge is essential is an important prerequisite for making intervention decisions. Teachers need a solid plan of curriculum and instruction. They need time to implement large-scale improvement based on informed understanding and improvement. Consider the extent to which a comprehensive district curriculum is aligned and doable across disciplines. Determine if the curriculum provides the opportunity for all students to access essential knowledge. Determine how core curriculum can be modified appropriately in the context of general education. Teachers need to link instructional strategies, resources, and then interventions to help students reach full potential.

2. *Align resources, including human.* Funding support and limitations must be clearly established. Any endeavor involves a great amount of time, which translates to money. After a clear picture has been established, it must be converted to hours, resources, and personnel costs. The demands of funding new initiatives, in some cases, can be almost as trying as purchasing intervention programs or materials. A district must make a commitment to maintain an adequate discretionary RtI budget for a three- to five-year program.

Funding sources need to be identified across school and district funds. Interventions must be prioritized based on evaluative data matched to the understanding of the effects of interventions on outcomes for individual students.

Realizing that schools may not have the financial resources to provide all services, creative ways are needed to align resources to provide services to students and families. An example is a “one-stop shop” where students and families access social, health, medical, recreation, family, and educational support before and after school, on weekends and holidays, and during extended hours aligned with family work schedules.

Educators and policymakers must understand the relationship between how money is spent and how staff and time are used. If policy- and decision-makers are serious about moving children forward, equitable funding and staffing must be allocated so that schools can provide staff and service providers in every school.

3. *Teaching and learning must be strategic.* Rethink the practice of placing struggling learners in classrooms taught by inexperienced teachers. Ill-prepared teachers often lack experience and knowledge for determining what

interferes with the teaching and learning process. Accountability pressures that focus on narrow definitions of curriculum and learning must be rethought.

Beginning in kindergarten, teachers can usually identify students who are “behind” in school-related skills as soon as they enter the classroom—children who cannot recognize their name, the child who uses very little vocabulary, or the child who pushes and shoves other children while at play. Children who display a lack of preparedness must be identified early and provided appropriate opportunities to function with peers in the school environment.

*4. Organize for effective instruction, prevention, and intervention.* Carefully plan RtI initiatives, and take into account considerations that might affect teachers, students, and families. Avoid the “smorgasbord effect.” Beware of the “research-based,” “standards-aligned,” and “evidence-based” labels. Most resources and instructional materials do not have long-standing evidence. There must be a distinction between an intervention that has been tested for subject matter content validity and the intervention itself.

Align with curriculum expectations, and develop strong criteria for selecting interventions. New initiatives and school reform adoptions must be taken in incremental steps. Research must be expanded on programs and strategies and best theories to practice applied across various school levels, contexts, and student populations. Proven interventions that address specific academic concerns; intervention intensities; culture, language, behavior, and socioeconomic levels; and disability types are needed.

*5. Acknowledge the realities of today’s classroom.* General education teachers are responsible for all children assigned to them. For some classrooms, this can mean that more than 90 percent of students who are at risk due to the many in- and out-of-school factors that negatively impact school performance. RtI can be very threatening to some, and overwhelming to others, because of the numerous reform efforts thrust upon teachers.

Secondary schools and classrooms are the recipients of years of school failure and accumulated student frustration with learning. Reform models for instructional improvement must take these realities into consideration. If RtI is to drive measurable learning, a good starting point is to help adults through the progressive stages of learning. The evolution of change and transition must be an integral part of the development and implementation process.

Nothing succeeds like success. Recognition of work and its worth generates enthusiasm and energy. Many teachers operate on a concrete, traditional level. It may be too much of a shift to operate with a new, dramatically different approach to instruction for various students. The paradox is, how can we expect students to abruptly master higher-level concepts and thinking if most teachers

and other adults have difficulty shifting from old paradigms to connect pieces into an overall picture?

6. *Teacher preparation and skill matters.* Since test scores are the main measure of school success, it must be noted that disparities across teacher abilities, school district types, schools, classrooms, years of experience, and teacher preparation must be minimized. Quality teachers encourage, inspire, engage, reflect, monitor, and guide in different ways. Teaching is not a simple matter; therefore, teachers need to graduate from rigorous teacher preparation with appropriate skills in place matched to local school district needs. This will require an aligned, seamless understanding and transition from universities to classrooms in school districts. It will be difficult for higher education to align with local districts if some commonality of curriculum, materials, and initiatives is not achieved.

Schools and districts have to refrain from asking teachers to “stop drowning while learning to swim.” Most teachers cannot process innovative practices along with the day-to-day teaching responsibilities. Strategic ways are needed to introduce RtI process to teachers, perhaps in phases, so they will not be as overwhelmed. Teacher/leader preparation and training programs must be developed in partnership with school districts. College and university presidents and professors must help determine and negotiate how to meaningfully prepare teachers for the realities of the work.

7. *Identify and train teachers to implement interventions with fidelity.* We know that some students need interventions. Through investigation, we must determine how to best manage fidelity assurance and assess the value of interventions in terms of types and evidence. A more urgent emphasis must be placed on research and program evaluation to determine which interventions and programs work under which conditions. We also need to know how standards-based curriculum content and assessments are aligned to interventions and instruction.

There must be a stronger bridge between special and general educators. Fidelity to instruction and interventions cannot be widely assessed until teachers have time, knowledge, and ability to effectively implement RtI processes and contribute accurate data on the quality of instruction and student learning.

8. *Teachers need time to meet and plan.* Teachers must discuss, reexamine, and work collaboratively to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Time must be provided for general and special education teachers, content specialists, and related service providers to strategize, diagnose, and develop appropriate learning plans for students. In addition, teachers need time to review and understand mounds of data that are available, link data to instructional decision-making, and monitor student progress and learning.

*9. Develop models for secondary education.* It is common knowledge that reading is the precursor to academic success in all subject areas and across the content areas. A few school districts are beginning to explore RtI models for kindergarten through grade 12. Generally there is a critical need to identify secondary-school-level, evidence-based interventions that remediate and accelerate reading, language, writing, and math development.

Until effective approaches are identified and schools are resourced with reading specialists and the like, secondary school students will continue to struggle with meeting grade-level, subject-area, and proficiency targets. High school teachers need massive retraining to change the process of instruction to meet varying needs of students in various courses, subject areas, and lessons.

Understanding how to manage the RtI process using traditional or alternative schedules for class periods and subject areas is an example of training that is needed. In this time of shrinking budgets, resources, and staff, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, search for something that is in vogue, or seek the next innovation. Identifying such models can help lead the way to selecting interventions and frameworks for improving learning conditions.

*10. Anticipate unexpected problems and concerns.* Potential problems might involve parents who take litigious action on compliance, due-process, and special-education procedures. Some parents/guardians or advocates may feel that the RtI process takes too long to make determinations when there is a threat of a disability. Educators must be prepared for questions about timeliness of referrals for special education services. They are also advised to steer clear of using RtI as a reason to avoid or delay referrals for special education or English-language-learner services.

If there is a sense that a child has a disability backed up with clear evidence, parental consultation and involvement, and reliable documentation, a child should not go through the steps of the RtI process. Policies must be in place to clarify and evaluate RtI procedures so that everyone has a clear understanding of how they relate to special education laws and rules (Weatherly, 2008).

Also, it might be wise to strategize how to handle leadership shifts that occur in the middle of an RtI implementation or any renewal process. Principals and district leadership are unstable in many school districts; therefore, a contingency plan may come in handy for unexpected occurrences that could impede the momentum of addressing students' needs.

*11. Family, community, and university support are critical.* A child's opportunities and success have a lot to do with his or her out-of-school experiences. We know that there are disparities in those experiences based on family income. But it is clear that these conditions cannot be used as excuses for schools not taking responsibility for their part in the educational process.

Families, schools, and communities also have a duty to partner with schools in support of student success.

Effective collaborations and partnerships between schools and mental health, law enforcement, public health, social, youth, and family service agencies; community and faith organizations; higher education institutions; professional organizations; and others must be identified to help support vulnerable students and families. Schools cannot solve or respond to all societal, family, and community problems that interfere with learning.

Educators must seek and coordinate stronger federal, state, community, industry, and family wraparound services that address out-of-school student needs. A nonacademic agency could add a more holistic picture of a student's functioning in different settings.

Philip Jackson (2010, p. 2), executive director of the Chicago-based Black Star Project, made the following observation:

While educators, society and government all have a role, it must be acknowledged that parents, families and communities of these youths hold the key. A national infrastructure must be created to manage the resources, programs, ideas and people who can solve this problem. Programs and good intentions cannot fix this problem. The solution needs to be comprehensive, systemic, well conceived, well funded, and well executed. The best school safety solutions start in homes and communities. The best discipline plan for a child is a cultural framework of mutual respect and self-discipline taught at a young age by their parents and the communities in which they live. The best mentors are loving, nurturing and caring parents.

*12. Employ technology.* Tools and resources are needed to alleviate some of the cumbersome administrative paperwork and time-intensive requirements. In addition, technology is needed as a longitudinal tracking system for gathering data on individual student growth. Data collection and reporting processes for special education and RtI should be seamless.

Training and development must be accomplished in small steps with time to practice each step in the classroom. Training has to be backed up with high levels of support and aligned to the needs of multiple users and the challenges teachers face.

Conversely, technologies can be inhibiting barriers if they are not integrated across purposes. Data must be accurate and secure enough to accommodate variations in processes, forms, selected interventions, and procedures. Parent portals can enhance two-way communication and ongoing educational planning between schools, parents, teachers, and students.

Technology, however, is only as good as the user, who inputs data either correctly or inaccurately and may or may not use the special features designed to advance learning. It is helpful to pay attention to maintenance and upgrades to keep the technology working. Some school districts are better equipped than others. Equitable funding and access for robust infrastructure, Internet, and dedicated administrative and instructional technologies for anywhere, anytime use continues to be a need for many states, cities, and school districts. Technical assistance, upgrades, and teacher/staff training will be ongoing needs.