

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Frequently Asked Questions About Response to Intervention

ROGER PIERANGELO ~ GEORGE GIULIANI



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Preface

Every day, educators make decisions about children that are of lifelong importance. Among the most profound of these is the conclusion that a child's educational struggles are the result of a disability. Educators engage in this difficult task because they know that, despite the dangers inherent in labeling students, important benefits may follow. When the decision is accurate, it can help parents and children understand the source of difficulties. It opens the door to resources, assistance, and accommodations.

Deciding a child does not have a disability is equally important. That conclusion says to general educators that they can effectively educate the student. It tells parents and students that success is attainable through hard work, practice, and engaged instruction, without special education services.

It is critical that schools make these decisions based on the best information possible. For the majority of children in special education, those identified as having a learning disability (LD), this decision has been made in a climate of uncertainty. For decades the field of learning disabilities has struggled with identification issues both in practice and in the law. However, with the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), the climate is changing.

When IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) began a process to "carefully review research findings, expert opinion, and practical knowledge...to determine whether changes should be proposed to the procedures for evaluating children suspected of having a specific learning disability" (U.S. Office of Education, 1999, p. 12541).

This review resulted in a "Learning Disabilities Summit." At this summit, a series of papers presented relevant developments in the LD field and provided empirical validation for the use of alternatives to traditional discrepancy models. Following the summit, a series of meetings was conducted to gain consensus in the field regarding issues around LDs. The following are consensus statements from the 2002 Learning Disabilities Roundtable report that apply to LD identification and were influential in the 2004 reauthorization process:

- Identification should include a student-centered, comprehensive evaluation and problem-solving approach that ensures students who have a specific learning disability (SLD) are efficiently identified.

- Decisions regarding eligibility for special education services must draw from information collected from a comprehensive individual evaluation using multiple methods and sources of relevant information.
- Decisions on eligibility must be made through an interdisciplinary team, using informed clinical judgment, directed by relevant data, and based on student needs and strengths.
- The ability-achievement discrepancy formula should not be used for determining eligibility.
- Regular education must assume active responsibility for delivery of high-quality instruction, research-based interventions, and prompt identification of individuals at risk while collaborating with special education and related services personnel.
- Based on an individualized evaluation and continuous progress monitoring, a student who has been identified as having an SLD may need different levels of special education and related services under IDEA at various times during the school experience.

IDEA 2004 represents consensus on at least three points regarding LD identification. These points are (a) the field should move away from the use of aptitude achievement discrepancy models, (b) there needs to be rapid development of alternative methods of identifying students with learning disabilities, and (c) response to intervention (RTI) model is the most credible available method to replace discrepancy. RTI systematizes the clinical judgment, problem solving, and general education interventions recommended in the consensus statements just mentioned. In RTI, students are provided with carefully designed interventions that are research based, and their response to those interventions is carefully tracked. This information is analyzed and used as one component in determining whether a child has a learning disability.

IDEA 2004 includes two important innovations designed to promote change:

1. States may not require school districts to use a severe discrepancy formula in eligibility determination.
2. Districts may use an alternative process including an RTI method described in IDEA 2004 as part of eligibility decisions.

Whatever model the district uses to implement RTI, such an adoption will affect more than a district's special education and evaluation departments. RTI requires a *way of thinking* about instruction, academic achievement, and individual differences that makes it impossible to implement without fully involving general education.