

# Response to Intervention: for Middle Years Students

Response to Intervention (RTI) has become one of the fastest growing and most successful problem-solving procedures used in our nation's schools. Designed to address the needs of struggling learners, RTI has been primarily embraced and implemented in primary school settings. However, an increasing number of middle years educators are beginning to explore RTI as a major initiative to meet the needs of their at-risk students. Since the structure of the middle years is vastly different from that of primary schools, there are a number of unique challenges that must be addressed in order to successfully implement RTI. This reference guide is designed to explore those challenges and provide middle years educators with a basic overview of RTI and its multi-tiered model of interventions.

## What is RTI?

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a problem-solving process, whose foundation is the provision of systematic, research-based instruction and interventions to struggling learners. It assumes that the instruction/interventions are matched to students' needs and that the monitoring of progress is continuous. RTI is designed to prevent long-term school failure and provides schools with a structure for screening students, providing high-quality instruction, and implementing and assessing targeted interventions within a general education setting. RTI can replace and/or augment the I.Q. discrepancy model for identifying students with learning disabilities. Both academic and behavioural issues can be addressed through RTI.

## Year Level Teams and RTI

Perhaps the greatest advantage to implementing RTI in most middle years environments is the emphasis on "year level teams" which assume a coordinated responsibility for a designated group of students. The core academic teachers, guidance counsellor and other support personnel (reading specialist, speech teacher, school psychologist, teaching assistants, etc.) who work on these teams enable the RTI process to be much more effective by improving:

- Opportunities for communication of critical information on students;
- Potential for sharing of instructional practices across teachers and disciplines;
- Ability to create a complete "picture" of the student's strengths and weaknesses since multiple teacher perspectives are taken into account;
- Planning and coordination of collaborative resources to address the student's needs, as well as teacher support;
- Opportunities to build stronger interpersonal relationships with individual students.

Furthermore, in some middle years settings, an administrator such as an assistant principal may be assigned to a year six level team and then be assigned to the same cohort of students the following year when they become year sevens. Or, if the administrator does not follow the same students from year-to-year, he/she works with the same year level team of teachers over time. Either way there is greater continuity and more opportunities for relationship building that contribute to the successful implementation of RTI.

## Implementing RTI in the Middle Years

Before RTI can be fully implemented, it is important to recognise that a number of factors in the design and structure of the middle years distinguish them from primary educational environments. These factors need to be thoughtfully addressed if the RTI process is to be successful. They include, but are not limited to:

- **Departmentalisation** – The middle years are designed around multiple instructional periods with students changing classes/teachers throughout the day versus the primary model in which students remain in one classroom with the same academic teacher for the full day. Although some middle years educators employ "flexible scheduling", most have 40–45 minute instructional periods. Since teachers may have up to five different groups of students on a daily basis, there are a number of challenges related to communication about students and the ability to successfully collaborate in addressing students' learning/behavioural needs.
- **Content Area Focus** – Middle years educators deliver instruction as content area specialists and thus focus on their specific academic discipline. They may have a more limited repertoire of instructional skills and strategies, and might therefore benefit from the assistance and/or recommendations of other professional colleagues in the school in order to help students who are experiencing reading difficulties, processing problems or attentional difficulties.
- **School Size** – The middle years usually have a larger student population than the primary years, thus creating problems that can affect students' academic and/or behavioural performance. Larger class sizes and an environment that may be less personalised than at a primary level means that struggling learners must be more closely monitored so that they do not "get lost".
- **Transitional Issues** – Middle years educators are challenged by the needs of students transitioning from the primary years to secondary school. They may have to address many issues related to pre-adolescent/adolescent development, social/emotional development and the need to replace previously learned negative behaviours (e.g., poor study or test-taking skills, anxiety about learning certain subject matter, feelings/perceptions of school failure, etc.). These transitional issues can make the middle years a difficult time in some students' lives.

While many factors of the middle years structure present challenges to implementing RTI, the role of year level teams provides a distinct advantage.

## Multi-Tiered Model

