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*Reproducible pages are in italics.*

### What Must We Do to Make Success the Reality for Every Child?

Once we have embraced the belief that the fundamental purpose of our schools is to ensure that every student learns what he or she needs to know to become a successful adult, and we clearly understand the skills and knowledge that our students will need to be competitive in the world they will inherit, then our final question would be, what must we do to make this a reality for every child?

While this question sounds daunting, the answer is within our grasp. There is tremendous evidence and consensus on what schools need to do to ensure that all kids succeed. As Ron Edmonds said more than thirty years ago: "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (Edmonds, 1979a, p. 23).

## Implementing the Formula for Learning

So what do schools need to do to unlock the potential of every child? If we took the research on effective teaching and condensed it into a simple formula to ensure student learning, the formula for learning would look like this (Bloom, 1968; Guskey & Pigott, 1988):

**Targeted Instruction + Time = Learning**

It is a universally acknowledged truth in education that all children do not learn the same way. Because learning styles and instructional needs vary from student to student, we must provide each student *targeted instruction*—that is, teaching practices designed to meet the *individual* learning needs of each student. We also know that all children do not learn at the same speed. Toddlers do not learn to walk or talk at the same rate, nor do students learn to read, write, or solve equations at the same time. We know that some kids will need more time to learn.

While few educational researchers, policymakers, administrators, or teachers would disagree with this formula for learning, very few schools have designed the instructional day to provide every student differentiated instruction and flexible time to learn. In reality, most schools operate in ways that are counterproductive to these outcomes. Consider for a moment how our traditional school system currently works:

- Each student is randomly assigned to a teacher for each grade (elementary level) and/or subject (secondary level).
- Each teacher is responsible for meeting all the learning needs of every student assigned to him or her.
- The teacher provides daily instruction, usually in a whole-group setting.
- Instruction is provided within a predetermined, finite amount of time, most often determined by the school's master schedule.
- If the teacher's instructional style and methods match a student's learning style, and if the class period provides the student with enough time to learn, then the student will be successful.

- If either the teacher's instructional style and methods or the time allotted do not meet an individual student's learning needs, then the student will likely fail.

Traditional school practices are in direct conflict with the formula for learning. The failure to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students makes *instruction* a constant; likewise, finite amounts of time for all students to learn new material make *time* a constant. In the traditional formula for learning, if instruction and time are constants, only one remaining element can be variable—*learning*!

As educators, we can't be surprised that our schools are leaving kids behind. The traditional model ensures this outcome. It worked perfectly for preparing students to be adults in 1950, but we are no longer preparing kids for life in Mayberry; we are preparing them for life in the age of BlackBerry. If our new mission is to ensure high levels of learning for all students, learning must be the constant, while instruction and time must be varied to meet the needs of every student. That is the purpose of RTI: to systematically provide every child with the additional time and support needed to learn at high levels.

While the underlying premise of the formula for learning is easy to understand, most schools find that putting this principle into daily practice is not nearly so simple, due to their overemphasis on raising test scores, compliance-driven decision making, one-size-fits-all directives, and implementation practices that are too burdensome for the site educators who actually do the work. We have carefully and purposefully designed this book to address these obstacles by focusing on two critical outcomes.

First, we strongly believe that changing our schools must start by building a culture of commitment, empowerment, and site ownership. We create this culture when we find balance between (1) expecting schools to abandon outdated traditional school practices and implement the proven practices necessary to ensure that all students learn and (2) allowing schools the autonomy to tailor the implementation of these practices to meet the individual needs of their students, using the distinct talents and resources of their local sites. We must be "tight" about *what* schools must do to help all students learn and "loose" on *how* they carry out these concepts and practices (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). This balance of responsibility and site ownership empowers schools. Second, we must adopt guiding principles and practices that are simple, practical, and doable. Our focus on these two vital outcomes has profoundly affected our rethinking and refining of our recommendations in this book. Nowhere is this more evident than in our efforts to simplify our thinking about RTI into four essential guiding principles.

## Understanding the Four Cs of RTI

If our goal is to create the right way of thinking about our work as educators, then what are the essential principles that must guide our actions? What practices must we follow if we want all students to succeed? We believe there are four; we call them the four Cs of RTI. They are:

1. **Collective responsibility.** A shared belief that the primary responsibility of each member of the organization is to ensure high levels of learning for every child. Thinking is guided by the question, Why are we here?

2. **Concentrated instruction.** A systematic process of identifying essential knowledge and skills that all students must master to learn at high levels, and determining the specific learning needs for each child to get there. Thinking is guided by the question, Where do we need to go?

3. **Convergent assessment.** An ongoing process of collectively analyzing targeted evidence to determine the specific learning needs of each child and the effectiveness of the instruction the child receives in meeting these needs. Thinking is guided by the question, Where are we now?

4. **Certain access.** A systematic process that guarantees every student will receive the time and support needed to learn at high levels. Thinking is guided by the question, How do we get every child there?

We contend that these four Cs are the essential guiding principles of RTI.

Consider for a moment the meaning of the word *essential*. When something is essential, it is absolutely indispensable, so important to the whole that the whole cannot survive without it. Without each of the four Cs, it is impossible for a school to achieve high levels of learning for every child. The four Cs work interdependently to create the systems, structures, and processes needed to provide every child with additional time and support. All other practices and specific recommendations flow from these four essential guiding principles, as we'll explore in the rest of the book.

## Rethinking the Pyramid

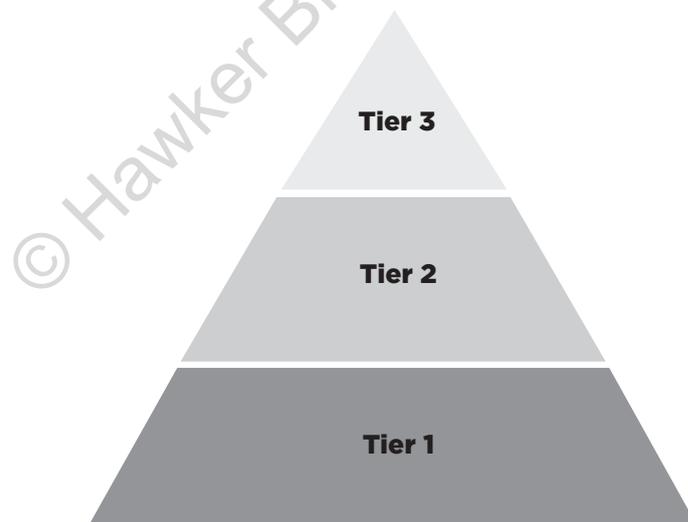In thinking of RTI, the most common image that comes to mind is the RTI pyramid (see fig. 1.1).



**Figure 1.1: The traditional RTI pyramid.**

# Creating a System of Interventions

Up to this point, we have focused our attention on the conditions necessary to ensure that most students succeed in initial Tier 1 core instruction. When a school creates a school culture focused on collective responsibility for student learning, ensures that every educator is part of a high-performing team, identifies the essential standards that all students must master, and frequently measures student learning and teaching effectiveness, a vast majority of the school's students are going to succeed. But our goal is not to have *most* students learn. If we want to achieve our mission of high levels of learning for *every* child, then we must be prepared with additional time and support for every student that demonstrates the need. Invariably, some students will need some extra help from time to time, while a few students will require a lot of extra help nearly every day. In other words, we must be prepared with a system of interventions designed to meet the unique needs of each child.

There are three critical considerations a school must address when creating an effective system of interventions. First, a school must build a toolbox of effective interventions. Students struggle at school for a multitude of reasons, so a school must be prepared with a variety of proven responses. Second, there must be time available during the school day to provide additional support without having students miss essential core instruction. Finally, there must be a systematic, timely, and reliable process to identify students in need of additional support. Without a foolproof identification process, some students will slip through the cracks. Failure to address these three critical components will place a school's RTI efforts on shaky ground and ultimately undermine the entire process. In this chapter, we'll examine how to create the toolbox and how to create flexible time during the school day for interventions.

## What Is an Intervention?

Many schools and districts argue endlessly about the language used to define the words *intervention*, *strategy*, and *core instruction*. To bring clarity to the topic, an *intervention* is anything a school does, above and beyond what all students receive, that helps a child succeed in school. This additional support can be a practice, method, strategy, and/or program. The important consideration is this: if all kids at a school

receive it, then it is part of Tier 1 core instruction and would not be considered an intervention. If a specific practice, method, strategy, or program *in addition* to core instruction is used on the child's behalf, it is considered an intervention. Interventions are not only actions directly in support of instruction. If a child demonstrates behaviors that interfere with the child's ability to learn and the school provides additional behavioral support, that is an intervention. Attendance support for a child with chronic absenteeism is an intervention. Medical support for a student with severe diabetes is an intervention.

A system of interventions can only be as effective as the individual interventions of which it is comprised. If a site builds a system of interventions with ineffective instructional programs and practices, all students will have certain access to what is not working.

Based on our work with hundreds of schools across North America, we see two primary reasons why many schools struggle with identifying effective interventions:

1. **The "more of the same" syndrome.** When we work with schools, we often have them list their current site interventions so we can assist with evaluating their effectiveness. A standard set of traditional "interventions" that have been used for years is listed first at practically every school: remedial support classes of varying types, study hall opportunities, summer school, retention, and special education. We then ask each school for evidence that these interventions are working—and are usually met with upturned palms and blank stares.

    We are not suggesting that highly effective summer school, special education, or study hall programs do not exist. A few do exist, but they are the exceptions. Research shows that the way most schools traditionally implement these programs is ineffective at best and detrimental to kids at the worst (Hattie, 2009). Our experiences as educators confirm this research. How many times have we seen a student below grade level in essential skills attend summer school, then return in the fall having significantly improved? Almost never. Instead, we often hear about how students in summer school "made up" a semester of English by attending three hours a day for six weeks. Did they master the essential learnings for the class, or simply jump through enough hoops to earn the credits? Nevertheless, most schools continue to utilize these ineffective responses.

    When it comes to interventions, giving at-risk kids more of what is not working is rarely the answer. Common sense would tell us this, yet many schools continue to build their system of interventions with practices that don't work, have never worked, and have no promise of getting better results next year.

2. **The "what program do we buy?" syndrome.** Many schools fall into the trap of searching for the Holy Grail of interventions—the perfect product to buy that will help all their struggling readers, writers, or math students. Wouldn't it be great if there were a single program a school could buy and every student would learn how to read? Every school would buy this program, and we would all be enjoying record student achievement!

Unfortunately, this product does not exist. At-risk readers don't all struggle for the same reason, so there is no one program that will address every child's unique needs. Some educational supply companies market their products as a cure-all; like most major corporations, their ultimate goal is to make a profit. If a company's claim sounds too good to be true, it probably is. There *are* some very good, scientifically research-based products available that can become powerful, targeted tools in a school's intervention repertoire—but there is no silver bullet. Ultimately, there is no "intervention-in-a-box" that can beat a highly effective teacher working with a targeted group of students. A school will get much better results if it spends less time searching for the Holy Grail and more time working in collaborative teacher teams to find the most effective teaching practices for its students.

# Understanding the Characteristics of Effective Interventions

How, then, does a school build a toolbox of effective interventions? The key to success is in aligning interventions to the essential characteristics of effective interventions, which are:

- Research-based
- Directive
- Administered by trained professionals
- Targeted
- Timely

Let's examine what these characteristics mean in practice in real schools.

## *Research-Based*

NCLB and IDEIA advocate the use of interventions based on "defensible research." The law sets the gold standard as "research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to educational activities and programs" (IDEIA, 2004).

This scientific model of testing the reliability of specific interventions has proven to be problematic. Creating blind studies with carefully controlled conditions is extremely difficult in a school setting, as so many factors contribute to a child's success in school. By strictly applying the criteria of *scientifically research-based*, some districts have created lists of "approved" interventions that constitute the only programs that can be used by their schools, subsequently restricting a school's ability to creatively meet the individual needs of each child. We also know that, outside of primary reading, there are a limited number of scientifically research-based interventions for each subject and grade level. On the other hand, failure to measure the validity of a school's chosen intervention practices has created a situation wherein "too many schools have adopted programs based on hunches and anecdotes," according to Russ Whitehurst (Dahlkemper, 2003).