

BEYOND
THE **RTI**
PYRAMID

**Solutions for the First
Years of Implementation**

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Solution Tree | Press



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Beyond the RTI Pyramid

Most educators have been introduced to the common conception of a three-tier RTI pyramid (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; L. S. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007), and that model has provided a mechanism by which educators across the nation could initiate RTI efforts. However, teachers who have been involved in the initial implementation of RTI have found that there were some incorrect assumptions resulting from the three-tier pyramid and how that pyramid was initially presented. In this chapter, after an initial discussion of the origin and implementation of the three-tier RTI pyramid, we will also investigate the fairly significant differences between the early implementation descriptions of the three-tier RTI pyramid and the actual experiences of teachers following that model.

The Three-Tier RTI Pyramid

In the commonly used three-tier RTI pyramid, Tier 1 is a general education tier that represents instruction that is presented to everyone in the class. Proponents of that three-tier model suggested that this “typical” instruction in general education classes should meet the needs of perhaps 80 percent of the students in the school population (Bradley et al., 2007; Boyer, 2008; L. S. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005; Spectrum K12/CASE, 2008). Furthermore, the general education teacher is considered the primary facilitator of instruction for Tier 1 and is expected to deliver whole-group instruction, limited small-group instruction, and differentiated instruction based on the needs of the students in the general education class. These expectations are not new and are not related directly to the implementation of RTI, but rather represent effective instructional techniques used in general education classes as a grounding for later RTI interventions. In this model, that general education teacher is also expected to monitor student performance in a variety of ways, perhaps with some assistance from other educational personnel, as allowable by the instructional demands of the class and the time constraints on the teacher.

Tier 2 in this pyramid has been presented as a targeted supplemental intervention for a small group of students who are struggling in reading (Cummings et al., 2008;

Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, 2006). This tier is typically described as meeting the needs of perhaps 15 percent of the school population. In a typical class of perhaps twenty-two students, one might expect that between four and six will struggle in reading and thus require a level of supplementary instruction that is more intensive than the instruction offered to the entire class (that is, Tier 1 instruction). Again, in most state models, the general education teacher is expected to deliver this level of instruction for those struggling students (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008) since general educators often form small groups for targeted instruction. However, there are exceptions; New York, for example, uses other educators, perhaps reading coaches or math specialists, to deliver Tier 2 interventions, and other states have various educators deliver the Tier 2 instruction.

Tier 3 is most often described in the literature as an additional, more intensive educational intervention tier, and is occasionally presented as instruction that takes place after a child is identified as learning disabled and declared eligible for special education services; thus, this has been presented as a post-special education placement intervention tier (L. S. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). Alternatively, others present Tier 3 as a highly intensive intervention that takes place in general education *before* a determination of eligibility for learning disabilities services (East, 2006). This level of intensive intervention is frequently described as one-to-one instruction designed to meet the needs of the remaining 5 percent of the school population (D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Figure 1.1 summarizes the tiers and their corresponding predicted percentages. Given a class of twenty-two students, we might expect that one or perhaps two students will require this level of intensive intervention, as predicted by the three-tier pyramid.

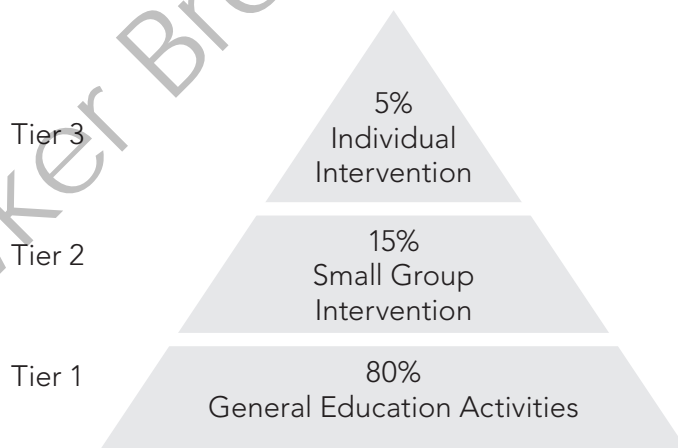


Figure 1.1 The three-tier RTI pyramid.

Embedded within this pyramid are a number of elements that seem common to most state models (Boyer, 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). First, almost all models are rooted in the concept of universal screening to identify students struggling

in various subjects. Next, almost all models present some concept of increasingly intensive education interventions, typically called *tiers* of intervention (Boyer, 2008). Next, most models require the use of research-based curriculum, and in that sense, RTI is similar to other national initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). Next, frequent monitoring of each individual child's progress is required, and finally, data-based decision making must be used to interpret the child's progress relative to curricular standards. These common elements (highlighted in table 1.1) can provide guidance for planning RTI efforts at the school level.

Table 1.1 Emphases of Most RTI Models

Universal screening to identify struggling students
Increasingly intensive education interventions presented in tiers
The use of research-based curricula in all tiers
Frequent performance monitoring of each child's progress in each tier
Data-based decision making when moving from tier to tier

Origins of the Three-Tier Pyramid

Because this three-tier pyramid is the most commonly used RTI model across the nation (Berkeley et al., 2009; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008), one may well ask where this concept came from. It often surprises teachers new to the concept, but before the recent legislation on response to intervention, there were a wide variety of different pyramids of instruction in the educational literature. Thus, both the concept of RTI and the three-tier pyramid existed prior to the recent national discussions of RTI as an eligibility tool for determining the placement of students with learning disabilities. This three-tier pyramid was first used in public health (Kame'enui, 2007) as well as in several other contexts as both a model for reading intervention and a positive behavioral supports model for curbing inappropriate behavior (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007; Horner & Sugai, 1999). In addition, Reading First programs around the nation used this three-tier model as the primary intervention model to assist students struggling in reading (Torgesen, 2007).

In fact, the early research on RTI in the literature on learning disabilities often referred to these Reading First programs as one model of how to implement RTI (Bender & Shores, 2007; Torgesen, 2007). For that reason, many states—Tennessee, Florida, West Virginia, and Texas are examples—built their RTI initiative as a three-tier model based on or in conjunction with their ongoing Reading First programs.

Of course, teachers in those Reading First schools were already applying a three-tier model of progressively intensive reading interventions for students struggling in reading, which gave them a certain advantage when it came time to consider how to implement RTI for eligibility purposes. For example, in West Virginia, forty-two schools were identified as Reading First schools, and the state department of

education used data from those schools as one indicator of the early success of RTI implementation (Boyer, 2008). In that state, there were also thirty-six other schools that were designated as pilot schools specifically for early trial implementation of RTI (Boyer, 2008), and the data from those schools have been combined with the data from the Reading First schools to justify the value of RTI.

Teachers in Reading First schools have been applying a three-tier model of progressively intensive reading interventions for students struggling in reading, which gave them a certain advantage when it came time to consider how to implement RTI for eligibility purposes.

In Texas, as a result of the national emphasis on reading, legislation was passed time-specific that required an extra thirty minutes of reading instruction daily for all students not meeting benchmarks in reading during the early grades. Based on that legislation, it is fair to say that before the RTI initiative, Texas had already implemented a second tier of reading intervention, involving a more intensive instructional experience for struggling learners and resulting in significant increases statewide in reading scores. Of course, this reading initiative also provided an excellent basis for RTI in Texas. Tennessee tapped its state coordinator of the Reading First program to lead the RTI initiative, specifically because the teachers in the Reading First schools were already using a three-tier intervention pyramid!

Clearly, it is not surprising that the three-tier model from Reading First programs became the most common for RTI implementation in the nation. In this text, we will use the three-tier model as the basis for our subsequent discussions because it is the most commonly used model. However, educators should realize that this is not a universally adopted model. Georgia and North Carolina adopted a four-tier RTI model, for example, and other states adopted five-tier RTI models. Educators from states that did not adopt the commonly used three-tier model should feel free to interpret the discussion in this text based on their state's RTI model. To facilitate such interpretation, in addition to talking about the three-tier model, I will describe the various intervention tiers at length as the *first supplemental intervention* or the *second supplemental reading intervention*.

Teachers' Initial Understanding of RTI

The premise of this book is that many educators have been introduced to the RTI concept, and that most schools have begun this process at this point. However, even in schools that have had preliminary RTI discussions, it may be advantageous to have teachers complete a self-assessment on RTI to provide a starting point for planning and implementation. A self-report needs-assessment survey for elementary teachers is provided in table 1.2 for this purpose (see page 192 for a reproducible form, or

visit go.solution-tree.com/rti to download it). This self-assessment addresses four specific areas of RTI and should provide the lead teachers, administrators, and RTI facilitators with a snapshot of exactly where educators in their building are in relation to RTI implementation. A form for middle and secondary teachers is provided in chapter 6, along with a discussion of the challenges for RTI implementation at those levels.

Table 1.2 Response to Intervention Self-Report Needs-Assessment for Teachers of Elementary Grades

<i>Circle one numeral for each descriptive indicator.</i>					
1 = I have little knowledge and want additional in-service on this.					
2 = I have some knowledge, but some additional in-service will be helpful.					
3 = I have a good understanding of this, but need to put this into practice this year.					
4 = I have complete understanding and have reached proficiency at this practice.					
N/A = Not applicable for our state, school, or district.					
General Understanding of RTI					
1. The pyramid of interventions in our state and district	1	2	3	4	N/A
2. The problem-solving model for our state or district	1	2	3	4	N/A
3. The tiers of intervention in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
4. The intervention timelines for each intervention tier	1	2	3	4	N/A
5. How RTI applies to all students	1	2	3	4	N/A
General Knowledge of Universal Screening and Progress-Monitoring Procedures					
1. The reading screening tests used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
2. The assessments of the five components of reading used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
3. The math assessments used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
4. Progress-monitoring procedures during interventions	1	2	3	4	N/A
5. Data-gathering procedures (weekly or daily) for RTI	1	2	3	4	N/A
6. Progress-monitoring procedures in content areas	1	2	3	4	N/A
7. The benchmark scores in reading and math	1	2	3	4	N/A
8. The data management system for RTI used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
Knowledge of Interventions to Facilitate Student Progress					
1. The reading instructional programs used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
2. The supplemental math programs for RTI used in our school	1	2	3	4	N/A
3. Behavioral programs to foster positive behavior	1	2	2	2	N/A
4. Frequency and intensity of interventions	1	2	3	4	N/A

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