

NAVIGATING THE CORE
CURRICULUM

RTI Strategies to Support Every Learner

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INTRODUCTION

Before we arrive at a destination, we need to make a few decisions about our journey. We might know where we want to go, but first we need to accurately analyze the facts. Analysis takes into account the starting point, travel options, and time parameters. For example, one may be able to walk or board a train, bus, plane, or car to get to a given city. However, some modes of transportation are preferable over others; each choice has both benefits and disadvantages. If there is traffic on a road, then traversing on foot for five blocks is quicker than sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic in a taxi. I often print a map, use a phone app, consult a friend, or look for directions online. Navigation requires planning, knowledge, step-by-step procedures, resources, collaboration, and then, after arrival, a review on whether the travel choice was a good one.

We might know where we want to go, but first we need to accurately analyze the facts.

Schools are faced with similar decisions as they navigate their curriculum to assist or accompany their diverse learners to safely and happily arrive at their learning destinations. As an educator, instructional coach, and author, my goal for writing this book is to offer evidence-based “travel

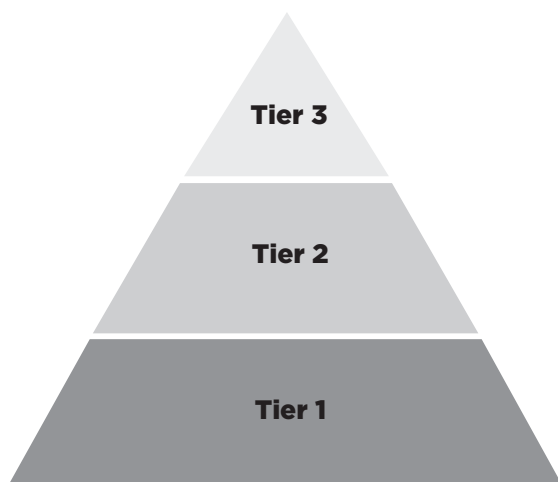
options” that will ease teachers’ pedagogical journey for schools and their classrooms.

Response to Intervention

Teachers can use instructional tiers to help students who do not begin their journey at the same starting points. Diversity mandates that instructional decisions respond to multiple learner levels; this assists teachers in determining the best teaching approaches to reach each student. Ultimately, teachers must consider that learners are often at different levels of content mastery, even if they’re in the same classroom. The response to intervention (RTI) approach addresses these levels.

RTI is a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) that offers diverse routes and step-by-step approaches such as differentiated instruction and universal design for learning (UDL) to help learners achieve mastery. RTI and MTSS are not separate ideas or concepts but partners that value how the core instruction is delivered to learners. Multitiered instruction is basically an instructional interaction. It is how teachers deliver the core instruction to students who learn differently. If teachers introduce, remediate, and enrich student levels with the whole class, small groups, and individuals, then they can effectively address student diversity.

RTI is often delivered in three tiers, as shown in figure I.1.



Source: Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012.

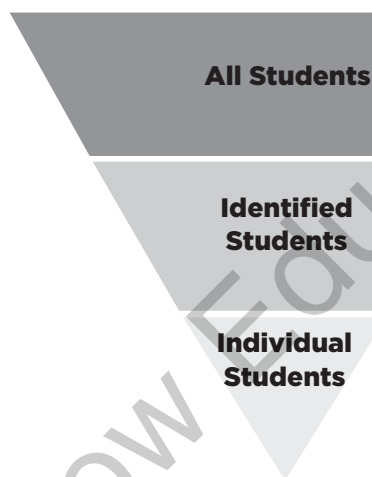
Figure I.1: The traditional RTI pyramid.

According to Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Chris Weber (2012):

The pyramid shape is wide at the bottom to represent the basic instruction that all students receive. As students demonstrate the need for additional support, they move up the pyramid, receiving increasingly more targeted and intensive help. Fewer students should need the services offered at the upper levels, thus creating the tapered shape of a pyramid. The pyramid is also traditionally separated into tiers, with Tier 1 representing grade-level core instruction, Tier 2 supplemental interventions, and Tier 3 intensive student support. (p. 11)

Tier 1 instruction is for the whole class or small groups; not all learners master the learning initially. Tier 2 intervention provides supplemental instruction in small groups, as needed; and Tier 3 intervention provides instruction for individual students who require additional scaffolding and practice. To further reinforce this concept, Buffum and colleagues (2012) provide an inverted pyramid, which focuses on “a school’s collective attention and resources to a single point: the individual child” (p. 11). The foundation for RTI is

that schools should not delay helping struggling students until they fall so far behind that they then qualify for special education, but instead “should provide timely, targeted, systematic interventions to all students who demonstrate the need” (p. xiii). See figure I.2.



Source: Buffum et al., 2012.

Figure I.2: The inverted RTI pyramid.

They contend that the pyramid “should be wide at the top to represent access to the core grade-level curriculum that all students deserve and need” (p. 11). This initial core instruction should meet the needs of most students and embrace differentiation. However, beyond initial instruction, some students may need more focused, targeted instruction, and the school should respond by individually attending to the needs of each of these students.

Instruction can address oral expression, listening comprehension, early literacy skills, reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, written expression, mathematical computations, mathematical problem solving, and critical-thinking skills across the grades and disciplines to help learners achieve academic success. Instruction and assistance to know and display appropriate behavioral, social, and emotional skills are also essential.

RTI requires teachers to provide systematic and explicit instruction to be sure they are planning, organizing, and sequencing their instruction in a way that makes sense to students at all levels of learning.

The following sections detail systematic and explicit instruction and how teachers can strategically implement it into the three tiers. You also will read about the four Cs of RTI, which identify the four guiding principles all educators should follow to help students succeed.

Systematic and Explicit Instruction

Systematic instruction is similar to a builder's blueprint for a house that is planned for and designed before building materials are gathered and construction begins (Colorado Department of Education, 2008). Even though systematic instruction refers to a carefully planned sequence for instruction, that does not translate to all heads facing forward using the same strategy at the same time for each student (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). Tiered instruction offers multiple entry points to allow students at varying levels to gain and retain knowledge and skills.

Explicit instruction requires strategic planning that links and builds on prior learning. Teachers must consider what students were taught, what students remember and can apply, and what students need to be taught. Multitiered instruction bridges gaps and connects students to newer concepts as the curriculum increases in complexity. Breaking up the learning into its discrete steps allows for practice, application, and retention within a multitiered approach.

Explicit instruction offers a road map for how a skill is taught, including a description of each step and the strategies employed. Concepts and skills to explicitly and systematically teach include

phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, mathematics, and behavior. Vigilance with structure and then flexibility allow tiered instruction to be responsive to student needs, interests, and levels.

Teachers must consider what students were taught, what students remember and can apply, and what students need to be taught.

Tier 1

Curriculum maps and lesson plans outline the core instruction, but they are never scripted ones, since student responses drive the choice of instructional programs and academic engagements. Tier 1 core instruction provides explicit evidence-based lessons for phonological segmentation, fluency, comprehension, basic mathematics facts, fractions, geometry, and algebra, to name a few academic areas, as well as monitoring on-task behavior to increase motivation and attention. Continual progress monitoring occurs throughout all of the tiers.

Responsive tweaking of instruction is based on student performance. Many teachers say they have experienced a scheduled fifty-minute period of instruction that some students grasp in fifteen minutes, while other students require fifty minutes or even five hours of instruction. Tier 1 often identifies the students who require additional instructional approaches to be given in Tiers 2 and 3.

Tier 2

Daniel Hallahan, James Kauffman, and Paige Pullen (2015) explain that Tier 2 usually takes about six to eight weeks. This time period allows students ample time to learn and then practice the skills. However, if a student is not showing any

progress, six to eight weeks may not be realistic. Rollanda O'Connor and Janette Klingner (2010) state "the effectiveness of successful tiers depends not just on instructional content, but also on teachers' responsiveness to students who respond poorly, or, in other words, on teachers' instructional savvy and flexibility" (p. 303).

Tier 2 includes, but is not limited to, small-group instruction, multiple interventions and resources, increased feedback and monitoring, access to both grade-level and student-level text, frontloading the content and challenging vocabulary, and using companion materials that align with the core materials (National Center on Intensive Intervention at American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2014).

Tier 3

Academic and behavioral interventions are more individualized in Tier 3 for students with increased learning needs and challenging behaviors. These students often require prerequisite skills that allow them to achieve successful experiences with the core instruction. Increased monitoring and reinforcement offer students in Tier 3 alternate ways to achieve successful engagement with the academics as well as necessary self-reflection.

Skilled interventionists often provide instruction in Tier 3 within and outside the general education classroom to address students' skill deficits. Students may tap out syllables, practice multidigit computations, read and listen to appropriately leveled text to understand what is implied in a nonfiction article, and receive more intensive strategies to successfully experience learning and behavioral strides. Progress monitoring is more frequent in Tier 3, with heightened teacher and student reflections and increased collaborative planning.

The Four Cs of RTI

Buffum and colleagues (2012) refer to the four Cs of RTI, or the four practices all educators must follow if students are to succeed. They consider these the essential guiding principles of RTI.

1. **Collective responsibility:** Embraces the idea that the primary responsibility of each educator is to ensure high levels of learning for every student
2. **Concentrated instruction:** Is a systematic process of identifying essential knowledge and skills that all students must learn at high levels. This includes determining the specific learning needs for each student
3. **Convergent assessment:** Is a continual process of analyzing evidence to identify the specific learning needs for each student and the effectiveness of instruction in meeting those needs
4. **Certain access:** Is a process that ensures that every student receives the time and support needed to learn at high levels

These principles support learning the core as well as meeting national and provincial learning standards. At the writing of this book, education focuses on using national and provincial standards and narrowing the global achievement gap (Achieve, 2015). Preparing students for successful adult lives and to be college and career ready involves planning, communication, and collaboration.

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