



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators. This month's issue provides a brief historical background on IDEA and describes how IDEA 2004 differs from earlier versions of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)/Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Following that, the authors describe the powerful potential and possible pitfalls of implementation. The attachment provides **Ten Intervention Tips to Help Students Respond** from Bruce Oliver.

Response to Intervention (RtI): An IDEA Whose Time Has Come



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

The Journey from Public Law 94-142 to IDEA 2004

The historical background included here is excerpted from the U.S.

Department of Education website

(www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/leg/idea/history.html) and from the writings of Daryl Mellard, University of Kansas and Doug and Lynn Fuchs, Vanderbilt University, all of whom are principal investigators for the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities.

Congress enacted the **Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA/Public Law 94-142)**, in 1975. That law stated these purposes:

- Assure that all children with disabilities have available to them...a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs.
- Assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents...are protected.
- Assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website, in the 40 years since the passage of **Public Law 94-142 (EHA)**, significant progress has been made toward meeting major national goals for developing and implementing effective programs and services for early intervention, special education, and related services. In 1970, U.S. schools educated **only one in five children with disabilities** (emphasis added), and many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded. To achieve national goals for access to education for all children with disabilities, a number of special issues and special populations have required federal attention. These concerns are reflected in a number of key amendments to the **Education for the Handicapped Act (EHA)** and **IDEA** between 1975 and 2004. The 1990 Amendments to EHA (PL 101-476), changed the name of the law to the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**.

Today, approximately 6 million children and youth receive special education and related services to meet their individual needs. Other accomplishments directly attributable to **IDEA** include educating more children in their neighborhood schools, rather than in separate schools and institutions, and contributing to improvements in the rate of high school graduation, post-secondary school enrollment, and post-school employment for youth with disabilities.

What Is IDEA 2004 All About?

IDEA 2004 authorizes, but does not mandate, the use of student responsiveness to scientifically-researched interventions as an alternative to waiting until an IQ-achievement discrepancy is established before students are considered for special education support. The term **Response to Intervention (RtI)** is not a part of **IDEA 2004**; it has, however, become shorthand in the literature for the process of early identification of learners struggling academically or behaviorally and, as appropriate, the provision of increasingly more intensive interventions. Even though the construct was originally intended to promote early identification of learning problems and determination of whether or not special education under the category of specific learning disabilities would be appropriate, RtI has in many instances become an “overall approach to school improvement through general education” and “in this context, RtI is a comprehensive support system aimed at maximizing achievement of all students by closely monitoring student response to instruction and adjusting instructional approaches based on student progress.” (Fuchs and Fuchs, Batsche, Cummings, and Young) The Lee County, Florida 2008 **Response to Intervention Manual** describes the RtI process as an early intervention and prevention process with the goal being to eliminate the future need for special education services for the child by intervening before a gap in academic achievement becomes too great. It further states that RtI is about prevention and early support, and is not a retooling of the pre-referral/child study team process. (<http://studentservices.leeschools.net/pdf/RTI%20Manual-update8-27-08.pdf>)

The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (www.nclld.org) lists the following features generally included in RtI frameworks:

- Universal screening within the first weeks of school
- High quality classroom instruction based on field-tested instructional design principles
- Ongoing assessment of classroom performance
- Use of research-based interventions/instruction
- Use of a multi-tier model of support with frequent monitoring of progress (benchmarking) during each level
- Fidelity in the implementation of researched-based interventions

The RtI construct has focused more attention on the general education classroom and requires that students' general education teacher(s) be a part of the team that identifies students needing special education services. It also requires that we act on our belief in the capacity of all students to learn and that we rethink how services are delivered to students in our schools. RtI ensures that poor instruction is not a possible explanation for learning difficulties when the vast majority of students are succeeding with appropriate scaffolding, extensions, and accommodations in that general education classroom.

As with any new initiative, it is important to read as much as possible and discuss those readings with others committed to the achievement of all students. The literature on RtI, including books, research studies, journal articles, blogs and e-newsletters, provides insights and suggestions about the powerful potential and possible pitfalls of implementation. Below are some ideas to keep in mind:

- A significant pattern in the research is the importance of children learning to read in the early elementary grades. Equally important is the use of proper instructional techniques in the teaching of reading to young students. Some writers caution about having young students work with paraprofessionals or parent

volunteers who have limited reading instruction expertise. The use of improper techniques can result in students falling behind in their skillfulness in decoding and comprehending what they read. Many experts stress that the development of literacy skills by third grade is essential in order to avoid irreversible difficulties that will inevitably occur in later grades thus impacting high school graduation rates as well as future economic success.

- There must be a common understanding of what high-quality instruction looks like. The components of a high-quality instructional program include:
 - Standards-based instruction tied to key concepts and big ideas
 - Explicit strategy instruction
 - Differentiated instruction (including scaffolding and extensions) based on an analysis of student work and assessment results
 - Provision of explicit and systematic instruction with lots of practice, including cumulative practice over time
 - Opportunities for students to apply skills and strategies in reading and writing meaningful text including real-world applications
 - Frequent monitoring of student progress and re-teaching as needed
 - Multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate learning
- The graphic most commonly used to illustrate the RtI framework is a three-or four-tiered pyramid. The literature is clear that a high-quality research-based instructional program in Tier One is essential. The proactive use of core instructional strategies like those listed above should address the learning needs of 80-85% of students and reduce the number of students requiring placement in special education programs. Those techniques used with all students plus timely and appropriate interventions for those needing more support with Tier Two interventions can minimize the learning gaps that developed when we used only the discrepancy model to identify students needing academic support.
- Many authors feel strongly that the greatest investment schools can make is to provide solid, research-based professional development for all educators in order to guarantee that the best instructional methods are being used with all students. Not only do classroom teachers need such professional development support, with their changing roles, school administrators and instructional coaches need it as well.
- Teachers must look beyond test preparation in their instructional delivery. If teachers concentrate on preparing students to pass this year's test, learning problems will still exist because they have not been addressed with appropriate interventions.
- Interventions should not be delayed until the results of formal assessments are available; they should be an everyday occurrence with continuous checks for understanding and follow-up interventions as a seamless part of instruction.
- Data-driven decisions and discussions about instructional and intervention approaches should be the norm. The problem solving process is a powerful tool to use in this situation. The better we can determine the cause of the lack of learning or the inappropriate school behavior, the better we can plan adjustments to the core instructional program. The steps that can drive discussions and the decisions are problem identification, problem analysis (identifying hypotheses), plan development (brainstorming possibilities and selected the most appropriate actions), plan implementation, and evaluation of the results of the intervention.

- In some districts, educators are asked to monitor student achievement by gathering data and submitting required forms. For some, this can be a cumbersome and time-consuming process that takes time away from planning and collegial collaboration. This may lead to thorough recordkeeping but little change in instructional practice; while teachers may develop proficiency at gathering data, they may have difficulty diagnosing what is causing student difficulties in learning. Professional development focused on implications of the patterns and trends and on digging down to the individual student level can minimize that problem. Collegial collaboration opportunities such as peer observations, development of common assessments, and looking at student work together can maximize the use of data in informing instructional decisions.
- Whenever any new initiative is introduced, the market is flooded with tools and products to assist schools in satisfying the requirements of the innovation. RtI is no exception; many companies are moving quickly to become RtI “solution providers.” Products range from books to web-based testing tools to instruments to monitor data gathering. There are many worthwhile and reputable products on the market that can support this work. On the other hand, school district personnel need to be discerning about purchases so as not to overwhelm classroom teachers with materials they have to independently figure out how to use. As author, researcher, and consultant Amanda Van Der Hayden wrote, “I think it is useful to keep in mind that people implement RtI, not products.”

There is no denying that teaching is complicated, challenging, and demanding. The attachment to this newsletter is a tool you can use with teachers to stimulate discussion on how we can better meet the needs of all of our students. Titled **Ten Intervention Tips to Help Students Respond**, the tips are a mixture of the inspirational and the practical, and the goal, as always, is to provide insights that will help educators carry out their jobs.

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Ten Intervention Tips to Help Students Respond

by Bruce Oliver

Introduction: The “RtI” statements below are designed to provide insights for educators to consider. As you read through the tips, consider which of the following statements best captures where you are with each: **I’m Already There, I’m Working on This, or That’s Something I Haven’t Thought About Or Tried.**

Recapture the Inspiration

Think about the earliest days of your teaching career; it may have been twenty years ago, last year, or just last week. If you are like many teachers, you approached your chosen profession with energy, enthusiasm, and a firm belief that you would reach each and every one of your students; that you would not let any obstacle get in the way of your or their success; and that you would never lose your belief in the capacity of all students to learn. Perhaps, reality set in and your optimistic viewpoint began to wane. Over time, the rigor and reality of what it means to “teach children” settled in. As a result, some of us forget our initial passion. If you see yourself in the above description, take some time to recall those early days and remember what it felt like to come to work every day with excitement and dedication to students and their learning.

Remember the Individual

When you plan lessons and units, you often think about teaching a concept or presenting content to the entire class. We all know that students do not learn uniformly or at the same rate. Experience also teaches us that when students are given a task to complete, not all students possess the necessary skills or prerequisite knowledge to complete the required work. By using your knowledge of the standards, the assessments, and the individual learners, you can complete a task analysis prior to giving the students an assignment. By analyzing the task, you can work with individuals or small groups to fill in learning gaps, or give the students a comparable task to match their readiness level.

Remove the Impediments

Whenever students show signs of lagging behind in their learning, it is important to take proactive steps to determine the reason for the learning difficulty. A timely examination on our part may provide solutions to deterrents which may be keeping the students from making progress. Solutions may range from providing a range of resources to discussing possible outside of school issues with a school counselor to allowing the student to pair up with a peer to one-on-one private conferences with the student. What is most important is that we take action before the struggles become deeper and more difficult to diagnose.

Revisit the Indicators

An increasing number of today's educators are gathering and analyzing student achievement data on a more frequent basis in order to determine if students are mastering the content being taught. Many of the assessments that teachers use may be short answer or multiple choice instruments. Some students do not do well on these types of assessments. Before jumping to the conclusion that a student is not learning, we should expand our repertoires of indicators that demonstrate if and how students are moving toward mastery. Alternative or non-traditional indicators may include one-on-one conversations with students (including teacher feedback) and allowing the student to correct errors and resubmit the assignment, or allowing the students to complete an outline or graphic organizer to demonstrate their knowledge of a concept. In the real world, we show what we know or have learned in multiple formats. Limiting how students can show what they have learned may lead to misjudgments or even a misdiagnosis of a student's learning problem. Yes, we do have to eventually help students develop test-taking skills, but the fact that standardized tests are most often multiple choice does not mean that we need to use that format exclusively in the classroom.

Recognize the Investment

Imagine what it must be like for students to put forth considerable effort to show what they have learned only to have the assessment returned with a disappointing single letter grade at the top. With substantial workloads, we may provide limited or no feedback at all on the quality or extent of a student's learning. Many assessments are returned incorrect items marked in red, a grade, and no growth-producing feedback. When students receive multiple or continuous work products of this nature, they may become discouraged and start to wonder, "What's the use?" When students view themselves as incompetent or even unable to learn, they may begin to give up altogether. Yet when we focus on what students have done "right," and provide on-going encouragement, the clear message conveyed is that the students' efforts are valued, they're making progress, and their investment in their learning will pay off in the long run.

Resist the Inclination...to rush to judgment

At the first signs of a student's struggle, some educators begin thinking about the possible supports or services the student might access beyond the current classroom setting. Reading specialist and author Richard Allington suggests that the first step in our thinking should be to ask ourselves what we are doing or not doing instead of trying to determine what is wrong with the child. As Allington wrote, "Teachers instruct in ways they deem appropriate. If a student struggles and falls behind, especially in reading, the conclusion may be that the child has a neurological problem and this may require special services." A wise teacher explores alternative methods to isolate the learning problem and then continues to seek the approach to learning that will work with that individual student.

Revise the Instruction

In order to help struggling learners be more successful, we may need to take a look at how we are teaching and perhaps add some new ways of thinking to our practice. New teaching approaches may include the following revisions:

- Present information concretely as opposed to abstractly and relate the content to real-world experiences
- Break lessons and tasks into smaller, meaningful chunks
- Connect new learning to content which has already been taught
- Pair students with peers who can assist them in meeting learning goals
- Allow students to demonstrate competence in a variety of ways
- Include repetition and frequent practice of discrete skills
- Use computer-assisted instruction to reinforce basic skills
- Have students set short-term goals in writing and review the goals periodically to assess progress toward their achievement
- Give students who work slowly extra time to complete their tasks
- Make sure that learners have close and trusting relationships with several adults on the staff
- Communicate a “you can do it” attitude to students and reward their effort and progress

Refute Their Indifference

Teachers often pose the question, “What do you do when students won't do anything?” I believe in my heart that students do not enter school with a defeatist attitude. Things happen along the way that cause them to become mired in failure and soon they see no point in even trying. But I hear stories of success in which teachers have turned students on to new learning. What are some specific things we can do to address the apathetic attitude of certain students?

- Model enthusiasm; despite the passivity that students might exhibit, it should not stop the teacher from getting excited about the new learning that will take place
- Make students feel important; pay close attention to what they think and how they act to look for clues, and if that does not work, be forthright and ask them what's important in their lives
- Give students choices; often students will stop trying because they are asked to repeat the same difficult tasks over and over; they might feel empowered when they have some say in how they will show what they have learned
- Share laughter and make it okay to show joy (and maybe even act silly) in the classroom
- Look for and acknowledge small victories; some students have been down for a long time and it may take time to build them back up

Re-inspire Their Imaginations

Some of the most successful teachers are those who “catch their students off guard” by behaving in an unorthodox manner as they deliver instruction or challenge students to problem solve by thinking creatively and using their imaginations. When students are given the opportunity to work with peers to apply or transfer prior learning in interesting ways, the conversations among small groups are often animated, inspired, and even dynamic. Moreover, when we devise intriguing questions to pique students' curiosity as they plan lessons, we often discover that there is a great deal more going on inside students' heads than what is conveyed in a pencil and paper test.

Re-imagine the Ideal

A current TV advertisement shows a group of students participating in a spelling bee. Well into the bee, after multiple rounds, the proctors appear to be worn out because no student has yet to miss a word. Eventually the exhausted head proctor declares everyone the winner. The tag line for the ad is “Rethink Possible.” It caused me to wonder what it would be like if we all applied that kind of thinking to our teaching and learning roles. It may seem idealistic or even a bit unrealistic but a change in thinking may just be the spark that can ignite our passion. It further brought to mind the essential question which guides all **Just ASK** workshops:

What do schools and classrooms look like when they organize around a commitment to the achievement of high standards by all students?

Reimagining what it would be like when students are successful, and following through with great instruction can cause us to feel renewed, energized, and more fulfilled. Isn't that why we got into this profession in the first place?